The Search for India's Rarest Birds

Edited by
Shashank Dalvi and
Anita Mani

juggernaut

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For Ramki S., who was Shashank's crime partner while they chased near mythical ('legendary') birds in the mountains of Northeast India and beyond!

and

For Maitreya, who first raised Anita's eyes skyward to the beauty of birds.

Contents

Introduction

The biggest high for a birder is coming upon a species hitherto unknown to science. When faced with a species that defies every description in a field guide, with a call unrecognized by mobile apps like Merlin, or online sound repositories such as Xeno-canto, what do birders do?

There is rising excitement (which they must fight lest they are being led on by a mischievously cloaked juvenile bird), as images and calls are shared with ornithological savants (often live from the field, over WhatsApp and other social media networks), then exultation, as the return messages indicate that they are on the precipice of a rare find, a new bird.

Alas, in India, where ornithologists, naturalists, collectors and hobbyist birdwatchers have criss-crossed the subcontinent's myriad habitats and landscapes for over two centuries, this moment does not arrive often. The British Raj was a period of enormous discoveries – there were new bird species to describe and information to collect on species seen for the first time. This resulted in the first-recorded baseline data for species distributions.

To date, this information is still being used in our field guides. Much of the credit for this goes to naturalists such as A.O. Hume, T.C. Jerdon, Edward Blyth, Brian Hodgson, Samuel Tickell and John Gould (who, surprisingly, never set foot in India) who were active between the mid-1800s and early 1900s.

In fact, the early ornithologists did such a thorough job that just five new species have been described since India's Independence in 1947 – the Mishmi Wren-Babbler (by Dillon Ripley in 1948), the Nicobar Scops Owl (Pamela C. Rasmussen, 1998), the Bugun Liocichla (Ramana Athreya, 2006), the Himalayan Forest Thrush (Per Alström et al , 2016) and the Ashambu Sholakili (V.V. Robin et al, 2017). But there is still plenty of excitement to be found in the pursuit of species that have been lost for decades. As James Eaton writes on his quest to find long-lost birds, '. . . that feeling of laying your binoculars on the prize is an addiction greater than what any narcotic could give you.'

In the last 40 years, there has been a surge in scientific ornithological studies as well as hobby birdwatching, both of which have fed off the availability of the tools of the trade. Before 1998, the most reliable source of information was Dr Sálim Ali's and Sir Dillon Ripley's 10-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, published between 1968 and 1974. One couldn't carry these tomes to the field, so identification became an exhausting process. Then came modern-day field guides by Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp (1998), Krys Kazmierczak (2000) and Pamela C. Rasmussen and John C. Anderton (2005, 2012), which

made bird identification easier. All three were easy-to-use and included updated information. In addition to these, the creation of e-groups, such as bngbirds and birdsofbombay, allowed for the exchange of information over the Internet. Webpages such as www.kolkatabirds.com and www.orientalbirdimages.org served as extremely useful databases. Simultaneously, two developments in India in the early 2000s – the IT boom and the arrival of digital cameras – triggered a massive surge of interest in birding and bird photography. Over the past decade, birding has become even more digital in India, with the appearance of recording equipment, which had been an integral part of birding in Western countries since much earlier. Today, websites such as www.xeno-canto.org are extremely popular among birders, both for locating birds in the wild and for identifying them. Over the last 15 years, platforms such as Facebook have catalysed the creation of many birding and wildlife groups; examples include Indian Birds, with over half a million members, and Sanctuary Asia, with over 2,50,000 members. Today's birders also have recourse to powerful global platforms, such as eBird, to track and maintain records of species sightings.

Given this increasingly supportive environment, species that had been missing for decades have been rediscovered in the last 30–40 years. This book chronicles the stories of those finds. The process of rediscovery is organically different from new species discoveries. The latter is often accidental, and may occur while exploring the path less trodden – as it happened in the case of the 1995 sighting

of the Bugun Liocichla by Dr Ramana Athreya – or when the birdwatcher chances upon a cryptic species with a brand new song, as in the case of the Himalayan Forest Thrush. Per Alström and Shashank Dalvi knew for certain that the thrush they were looking at was singing a very different tune (literally) as compared to the more familiar Plain-backed Thrush. Years of genetic and museum studies later, in 2016, the different-sounding song led to the description of the Himalayan Forest Thrush as a new species to science.

Rediscoveries, in contrast, are often premeditated, though the trigger may well be a chancy find, as Pamela C. Rasmussen's tale of the rediscovery of the long-lost Forest Owlet illustrates. An odd listing in the register of a century-old collection drew her down a path of enquiry, which led to the realization that birdwatchers had been looking for the bird in the wrong place for decades. But it took hundreds of hours of meticulous work with museum specimens coupled with fieldwork, for the pieces to fall into place. The study of museum specimens is crucial for delineation, especially of cryptic species that can be decoded only in the hand. The specimens can also provide valuable clues for the search – enlarged gonads or a brood patch, if present, indicate that the specimen was collected during the breeding season. This may point the seeker towards a specific period of the year – the breeding season in this case – when it might be easier to spot the bird, as they tend to be more conspicuous or vocal.

Though the tools of rediscovery – museum specimens, fieldwork and, increasingly today, genetic analysis – are

the same as that for the discovery of a new species, the scenario has changed dramatically from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when so many new species were described. Field expeditions of the past required travelling to remote locations and often lasted months. Today, roads have reached the remotest corners of the country, and while the road is a metaphor for habitat destruction, it has made rediscovery a lot easier. Roads have also made weekend twitches – when you parachute into a remote location to tick-off a species for your life list – possible, as Atul Jain's tale of his twitching adventures illustrates.

Roads, a metaphor for development-led destruction of a habitat, are also the reason why some searches remain fruitless. Aasheesh Pittie's deep dive into the written history of the Pink-headed Duck in India (for that is all we have of what he calls 'the seemingly disdainful Pink-headed Duck') was nothing short of an exercise in literary forensics to discover why this bird has eluded so many searchers. It becomes clear that the species was rare in its distribution to begin with, and was possibly common only locally within its wider range, which in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extended across northern and eastern India (with some records from the south as well) in the winter, with a narrower breeding range restricted to parts of Bengal and Bihar. The press of human activity was calamitous for such a species. Sadly, as the cases of the White-bellied Heron and Great Indian Bustard demonstrate, history seems ready to repeat itself.

In today's world, even if roads exist, it is the birder who makes the effort that reaps the rewards. As Andrew Spencer and Puja Sharma's story of the finding of the Mount Victoria Babax on Phawngpui – Mizoram's highest peak – shows, all clues indicated that the bird was likely found there, but it took a determined duo to commit time and make a dedicated search to find the bird. Sayam Chowdhary's quest for the Masked Finfoot in the myriad waterways of the Bangladesh Sundarbans or Praveen J.'s search for the Banasura Laughingthrush similarly show that finding or rediscovering a bird requires strategy (where to look) and stamina (read: relentless fieldwork). In many cases, this is a race against time as rare birds are often clinging precariously to the few remaining pockets of their habitat – the Bangladesh Sundarbans is one of the last strongholds left for the Finfoot, while the Banasura Laughingthrush is in an equally precarious position, stranded as it is at the mercy of a very restricted elevational range and climate change.

Make Mine Rare

What makes a bird rare? The immediate meaning points to birds found in low numbers and within a specific type of habitat. The Jerdon's Courser would certainly qualify as one. As Bharat Bhushan's exciting search for this bird shows, the ground dweller was found in a narrow band of 'plains-forests below the hilly regions', and more specifically, as Bhushan states in his essay, within 'thin and open scrub near rocky hills'. Even within such a precise range, sightings were sporadic.

But paucity of records has sometimes more to do with accessibility or the explored status of a habitat rather than species numbers as demonstrated by the Nicobar Megapode and Nicobar Scops Owl. The logistics of travel to the Nicobars is complicated, but once you get there, a concerted search should reveal the Megapode, as Radhika Raj's essay on this endemic species demonstrates, while the owl is surprisingly hard to miss, as Shashank writes. Also, take, for example, the Mrs Hume's Pheasant, which was a mythical bird for birders, until recently. But increased explorations of the Naga Hills – close to the Manipur–Myanmar border and further north into Nagaland have shown that given the right habitat (oak conifer mosaic), time of day (a nighttime search is fruitful) and specific skill set (to see the bird you have to enlist local hunters turned bird guides whose tracking skills are unparalleled), a birder is highly likely to see the bird. The same is true of the once mythical birds of the North-East; in early 2000s, most such birds – Yellow-throated, Brown-capped and Moustached Laughingthrushes, Gould's and Rusty-bellied Shortwings, Mishmi Wren-Babbler, Hodgson's Frogmouth, Sikkim and Cachar Wedge-billed Babblers to name a few – could only be seen in field guides, while some required an expensive birding trip to Bhutan. Today, the access provided by roads, tourism infrastructure and excellent bird guides means that many once rare birds can be seen on a well-planned trip.

Access has also levelled the playing field. With the great surge of interest in birdwatching, many more Indians are, literally, taking to the field. This means that many of these

rediscoveries are being made by Indian ornithologists, naturalists and birdwatchers, thus passing the ownership of knowledge into Indian hands. In the past, species discoveries were part of a larger pattern of intellectual colonization. It also didn't help that in the pre-Internet era, scientists and biologists from well-funded institutions, typically from the West, had access to the subcontinent's museum specimens and printed information which were not available on the subcontinent. In a telling example, foreign biologists described a group of lizards from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as new species to science, based on collection done by Indian biologists; the former claimed the credit and the glory of discovery without setting foot on the islands while, sadly, the latter were not even credited as co-authors and their contribution was simply glossed over in the 'Acknowledgements' segment of the manuscript. It is another matter that the same pattern is being repeated by Indians scientists, who 'scoop' data and discovery work done by peers – there are many such examples in the world of Indian herpetology, which is the latest hotspot for new species discovery. Notwithstanding the irony, we are, as Indians reclaiming our natural heritage.

Fortune Favours the Brave . . .

. . . And the intrepid explorer who is willing to go boldly where no birdwatcher has gone before. Chasing the next set of rare birds for India – and there are some exciting possibilities, as Frank Rheindt lays out in the concluding

essay of this book – will require birders to move out of their comfort zones and chart the unchartered. To make this happen, they will have to disprove what James Eaton says about them – 'Birders generally are a bunch that enjoy treading the well-trodden path, rarely straying to explore new areas.'

It is also time to go beyond discovery to study the ecology of a species post rediscovery. The raft of scientific work that followed Rasmussen's rediscovery of the Forest Owlet has few parallels. Other kinds of follow-throughs may also be absent. As Bhushan comments on the 're-disappearance' of Jerdon's Courser, ' . . . the species has not been reported or sighted elsewhere in its known range, because of the lack of appropriately methodical surveys.'

Some put down great finds to plain, dumb luck. We think differently. For the birder or the biologist willing to make the effort and stay the course, the rewards will be the greatest – for surely, the harder you work, the luckier you get!

1

A Charismatic Duck Painted in Carnation and Chocolate

AASHEESH PITTIE

The Pink-headed Duck is a species that has certainly gone extinct in the subcontinent, and we'll let the author tell you why. With no living person having seen the bird, Aasheesh Pittie performs a splendid piece of literary forensics to create a compelling picture of this stunning duck. Going beyond the piece, it is perhaps time for India to officially declare the species extinct. Such a declaration will force us to publicly recognize a reason for its downfall – habitat loss. With the fate of birds, such as the Jerdon's Courser, Great Indian Bustard, Lesser Florican, White-bellied Heron and Finn's Weaver also hanging in the balance, there is no better time to own up to this, and act to fix it. If the Pink-headed Duck could motivate us to protect key habitats and come up with species-specific conservation plans and their implementation, its loss would have not been in vain.

Bhawani Das studied the bird intently. Most of the time it stood stock still in the large aviary, occasionally preening, listlessly pecking at the ground, or rheumatically waddling a few yards, but never far from him. It was a bright winter morning sometime between 1777 and 1782,[1] and Das could not complain about his subject. It had clean lines and a simple colour pattern. He noted the swan-like neck, the sloping forehead and the reddish eye fixed upon him. He had been commissioned to make its portrait.[2]

Das hailed from Patna (Bihar) and had been trained in the style of the Mughal School of miniature painting. But the group in Patna had developed their own identity by merging the styles of Mughal and European schools, forming the Patna School or Patna Qalam, often using English paper and watercolours for their work.[3] Unlike most such schools of that time, patronized by royalty and the landed gentry to glorify themselves and their achievements, artists of the Patna Qalam painted quotidian dramas they saw around them, ethnographic portraits of natives engaged in various trades and occupations, and the natural environment, specializing in native flora and fauna. They did not embellish their work with illuminated borders or illustrated backgrounds – simply painting their subjects against a plain white setting, thereby forcing the viewer to focus on the subject by eliminating every other element that would distract from it. They used natural pigments for colours and specialized in creating delicate shades in watercolour.

Work was scarce in the late eighteenth century, especially for skilled artists, and the few patrons were scattered far

and wide. The competition to reach them before others did must have been fierce amongst the artists. When an opportunity to work in Calcutta (now Kolkata) presented itself, Das made haste to reach his new employers, Sir Elijah Impey, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Bengal and his wife, Lady Mary. The Impeys lived in a spacious house with extensive grounds. They had created a justifiably famous and impressive menagerie of native fauna in this park-like property on Burying Ground Road, which was later renamed Park Street, after the nature of their property.[4] A large aviary was part of their private zoo – outside which Das now found himself.

He picked up a brush and swirled it with a spoonful of water in a *Gulabi* (rose-coloured) pigment made from shellac,[5] laying a few tentative washes on a piece of paper he kept for testing the shades of colours. The spreading *gulabi* hue was entirely to his satisfaction, and with deft strokes he began to shape the head and neck of the bird directly onto the paper, in freehand, without having first sketched its outline in charcoal (another specialty of the Patna School). He sat comfortably, cross-legged on the ground, balancing the board with the thick art paper on his knees, the tools of his trade spread out next to him.

With each glide of his brush, the bird emerged on the paper, a close likeness of the living specimen in front of him. He shaved a larger quantity of a dark brown pigment, extracted from the bark of trees, into a shallow container and stirred in a few drops of water. With flowing strokes

from a thicker brush, he filled in the body of the bird with this colour. Working swiftly with the difficult medium, he applied it in layers to darken the body and delicately highlight the feathers; then, with the finest of brushes, he elegantly created a subtle pattern on the head and neck in a uniquely Patna Qalam embellishment known as Java stippling (similar to barley grain).[6] The bare parts – legs, beak and eyes – he left for the end. So accurate was his depiction that he included a little tuft on the bird's crown, colouring it a deeper pink, revealing to ornithologists nearly two centuries later, that his model was a drake in its prime. When Bhawani Das's 47 cm high and 34 cm wide watercolour[7] was complete, its subject, a carnation-and-chocolate-coloured duck, simply titled '"Redhead" in Persian',[8] was destined to become one of the most enigmatic of birds ever found in South Asia – the seemingly disdainful Pink-headed Duck (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*).

Not only did the Impeys commission paintings of the flora on their grounds and the fauna in their zoo, but they also engaged talented local artists to paint scenes from the ordinary business of life that the latter saw around them, including their own little domestic dramas as subjects. In their six years of residence in Calcutta, they collected close to 300 watercolours by the likes of Bhawani Das, Shaikh Zain Uddin and Ram Das.

The Impeys 'returned to England with the pictures in 1783, and some were used by the distinguished English ornithologist John Latham (1740–1837) as the basis for his type descriptions of several Indian and Asian birds new

to science.'[9] When Sir Elijah died in 1809, a part of the 'Impey paintings' was sold at auction a year later. A few were bought by the 13th Earl of Derby, a keen naturalist, for his home at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool. It was most likely Latham who brought this unique collection to the attention of his friend, the Earl. The Liverpool Museum, National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside (UK) (now National Museums Liverpool) acquired Bhawani Das's painting of the duck from the Knowsley group in 1998.[10]

This connection, between the paintings and Latham's using them to name their subjects, is not as tenuous as it seems, for he recorded, at least for some of the new names he proposed, that he was describing them from an Impey painting,[11] or one from any of the several other art aficionados whose collections he had access to.[12] Lamentably, such irrevocable provenance has not yet been discovered for the Pink-headed Duck's painting, except the fact that no earlier painting of the bird is known, from which Latham could have described it. He had certainly not seen a physical specimen of the bird. Thus, for the first time in 1787, Latham used the English name Pink-headed D.[uck],[13] and latinized it in 1790 as *Anas caryophyllacea*[14] or the 'Carnation-pink Duck'.[15,16] In a brief note Latham stated, 'Inhabits various parts of *India*; most frequent in the province of *Oude* (Awadh). Is seldom seen in flocks, for the most part, only two being found together. Is often kept tame.'[17] His source for this information was a 'Mr. Middleton'. Nathaniel Middleton (1750–1807) was a civil servant of the British East India Company, and, briefly,

Resident at the court of Shuja ud-Dowla (1732–1775) of Awadh, Lucknow. He also 'displayed a real interest in Indian art and built up a large collection of . . . natural history drawings by Indian artists.'[18]

The turbulent waters of early nineteenth–century scientific nomenclature tossed *caryophyllacea* between various Anatid genera – *Fuligula caryophyllacea*[19] and *Callichen caryophyllaceum*[20] – but it gradually settled under the evocatively coined genus *Rhodonessa* (rose-tinted),[21] which the German ornithologist Ludwig Reichenbach created in 1853, its binomen becoming *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*.[22]

The first specimen of the Pink-headed Duck to reach a European museum was a mounted immature male, which Alfred Duvaucel (1793–1824) presented to the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, in June 1825 (though there is some uncertainty over whether the museum acquired it by other means).[23,24] Duvaucel was an intrepid French explorer and naturalist who collected for the museum in South and Southeast Asia from 1818 till his tragic and untimely death in 1824, after a protracted period of ill-health that began after he was tossed by an Indian Rhinoceros in Bihar. He never recovered, suffering additional health issues, sailing ultimately to Madras (now Chennai) in the hope of better treatment, which is where he ultimately succumbed.[25]

The earliest mention of the duck in a British collection was in 1838, when Thomas Campbell Eyton (1809–1880), the sportsman-naturalist noted, 'Few specimens have been brought to this country: we only know of two at present existing; one is in our collection, the other in the British Museum; both were purchased at the sale of the late Col. Cobbe's collection.'[26,27] Colonel Thomas Alexander Cobbe (1788–1836) of the East India Company, hailed from a *fauji* family.[28] He was the political agent to the Governor-General at Murshidabad, Bengal (now West Bengal) from 1831 to 1836, and evidently a keen shikari. After his early death, his collections and trophies were auctioned at Christie's,[29,30] and a 'stuffed' (mounted) specimen of the Pink-headed Duck, from 'N. India', was purchased by the British Museum.[31]

By 1844, when George Robert Gray (1808–1872), the zoologist, author and head of the ornithological section of the British Museum, collated his *List of the Specimens of Birds in the Collection of the British Museum*, now boasting a Pink-headed Duck specimen from Bhutan and Nepal,[32] specimens had begun to trickle into Western museums: Philadelphia, USA (1840), and Berlin, Germany (1843); other 'old' specimens remained undated.[33]

The Pink-headed Duck, ultimately fated with extinction, was truly a recluse. Even a hundred years after Latham's description, its mystique was such that the charismatic Allan Hume (1829–1912) exclaimed in the pages of his catalysing journal *Stray Feathers*, 'There is something odd about this Duck. It must be common somewhere, but *where*, I have

failed to discover . . . Can any one help me to the home of this species?'[34] From that century of trigger-happy collectors and 'sportsmen' of small 'game', who proudly notified their 'bags' [author's emphasis] in extant tabloids or journals, I could glean only ten such records of actual occurrences – through sightings, market purchases or physical specimens. Information about the bird was sparse too. Latham's cryptic notes about its antipathy towards flocking, and docility in captivity were often echoed by subsequent authors.

Pink-headed Ducks were never seen in large rafts or armadas. One would see a brace of them, or if lucky, a paddling, on the still waters of secluded forest pools. They were wary of humans, preferring the quietude of lowland freshwater wetlands in swampy grass jungles, such as 'tanks, pools and nullahs fringed by tall aquatic vegetation, marshy swamps with dense beds of reeds and, in winter, lagoons adjoining larger rivers, regenerated by seasonal flooding. It was not found on rivers or running water of any kind.'[35] Despite printed records showing a wide distribution range in South Asia, mostly from India (especially from the northeastern parts of the country), and a few records from Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, it was indeed a *scarce* bird.

Due to its secretive nature, and rarity, we know very little about its ecology. The birds moved around in pairs or small flocks. They did not mingle with the larger flotillas of ducks but seemed to stay in their vicinity. During the breeding

season, April–July, only pairs were seen, or small parties (families?) of birds. They nested in long grass or grass tufts, even away from water, building well-formed circular nests made with dry grass and feathers, measuring about nine inches in diameter and four to five inches deep, in which they laid uniquely (they are unlike any other ducks' egg!) spherical stone-white eggs. Considering this egg, Michael Walters (1942–2017) believed that the bird 'was not closely related to any other duck and possibly represented a relic of an old line that had died out elsewhere.'[36] Closer home, the National Zoological Collection in Kolkata holds five eggs and two skins of the Pink-headed Duck![37] And the Lucknow State Museum holds a mounted specimen of a drake, rather shabby now, but almost relegated to anonymity by an ignorant museum hand's wrong labelling![38] It is the sole survivor of the three that George Reid (fl. 1879–1890) recorded in his catalogues of 1886 and 1890, all procured from the Lucknow area.[39,40] All that we know about their courtship – alas, not from their life of secrecy in the wild, but from the behaviour of captive birds – is that drakes puffed the feathers of their heads and pulled in their heads to rest between their shoulders. Then the neck was stretched upwards and a weak, wheezing call uttered heavenwards. Pink-headed Ducks had a low quack. Both sexes took part in nesting duties. The young fledged in September–October. The birds spread out over a wider area during the cooler weather, November–March, frequenting habitats as mentioned above.[41]

In an age when hunting non-human life was considered a sport and wilderness areas were either combed for fur or feather targets in the dubious pursuit of this frivolous sport, or out of the necessity of providing protein for the pot, the Pink-headed Duck was pursued for its rarity. Rarity is a magnet for both charlatans and connoisseurs. The latter covet it for its lustre and for the fame it will bring, the former for the easy lucre it promises. As far as rare forms of non-human life are concerned, the combination of these two leads to the end of the road for an endangered species. The bird was not a victual delight, except to Thomas C. Jerdon (1811–1872),[42] but it was persecuted for the trade. Collectors and museums were a ready market for unscrupulous trappers and hunters for they paid handsomely. The shy and reclusive hermit of forest pools did not stand a chance against this unrelenting persecution and rapacity.

The last wild bird was shot in 1935, in the Darbhanga District of Bihar.[43] There were several subsequent claims of sightings in the wild, by different people, from different parts of the country, but no one presented a clinching evidence, and hence they were not accepted. Many confounded the Red-crested Pochard with the rare one and foundered. In the opaque mistiness of dawn, crouched amongst tall reeds near still forest pools, the eyes could trick one into agreeing with what the mind wanted to believe!

Julian Hume makes a strong case that collectors escalated the extinction of the Pink-headed Duck.[44] Public and private zoos were popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India, England and the rest of

Europe. Ornamental creatures were their prized possessions, sourced from agents who had global contacts in far-flung continents. It was a trade that paid rich dividends. Despite the heavy demand for the Pink-headed Duck, live specimens trickled in very slowly to the Indian or British markets, a sure sign of its unsocial habits, unlike other waterfowl, and more tellingly, of its rarity. They were trapped in the districts of Goalpara (Assam), and in Purnea (Bihar), in Benoa Chaur (Bihar), in Rangpur (Bangladesh), in Dhubri (Assam) – across the floodplains of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, in India and Bangladesh. Whatever birds survived the arduous sea voyages (there is no documentation of the number that perished at sea), died in captivity, despite being held in aviaries that had seemingly excellent conditions for their survival. The birds were long-lived, some surviving more than twelve years in captivity, but they did not breed, much to the chagrin of their bird-fancying captors (one of whom exclaimed in frustration that they were very stupid birds because they refused to breed).[45] Snatched from their tropical homes and incarcerated in temperate ones, it was as though the bars of their aviaries, constricting their horizons, switched off freedom's regenerative dynamo. Robbed of a *raison d'etre*, captive drakes displayed listlessly, lifting their fading carnation heads skywards, forcing that procreational wheeze from their peculiar tracheae in a primeval, hardwired display of a hapless, poignantly mortal pantomime. And one by one they died; they died in London Zoo; they died in Lilford Park, Northamptonshire; they died in Calcutta Zoological

Gardens; they died in Berlin Zoo; they died at the Chateau de Cléres, Normandy (itself destroyed by German bombs in WWII); they died in Connecticut, USA; and they perished in Foxwarren Park, Cobham, England. (Their skins became prized possessions in various museums' collections.) Neither did they survive the efforts of the zoöphile Ezra brothers.

Sir David Ezra (1871–1947) was a prominent member of the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta. He was the Sheriff of the city, a director of the Reserve Bank of India, President of the Asiatic Society, and head of multiple industries.[46,47] He also had a large private zoo at his residence where, amongst other creatures, he held Pink-headed Ducks before they could be exported to his avid aviculturist brother, Alfred Ezra, OBE (1872–1955), in England. Alfred also owned a menagerie at his home in Foxwarren Park, Cobham, England. At a time (1923) when 'an unskilled worker averaged Rs 0.5 per day, a skilled worker around double this amount'[48] – Sir David advertised in leading Indian newspapers, his intention to buy Pink-headed Ducks for the royal sum of Rs 100 each! This was indeed a windfall for any prospective trapper, except for one problem – the rarity of the bird. Despite the tens of thousands of ducks shot or trapped and sold in Indian markets, the number of doomed Pink-headed Ducks that were caught or shot was abysmally low. Over the next couple of years, Foxwarren Park received at least fifteen birds. A second reward was never collected! Today, fewer than eighty Pink-headed Duck skins exist in museums. Charles M. Inglis (1870–1974), naturalist and curator of the Bengal

Natural History Society's museum in Darjeeling, had the dubious distinction of seeing the last wild bird in June 1935. The last captive duck died in an Ezra aviary in 1948.[49]

Several subsequent expeditions into remnant Pink-headed Duck habitats in north-eastern India and Myanmar, between 1960 and 2017, failed to locate the bird. The first of these, in 1960,[50] was by none other than 'The First Lady of Indian Ornithology',[51] the sagacious Jamal Ara (1923–1995).[52] The bird eluded others who scoured potential habitats. Rory Nugent[53] did not find it, Jonathan Eames and his team did not find it[54] nor did Richard Thorns and his team.[55] This is not surprising given that India's and Myanmar's burgeoning populations have drained the bird's favoured lowland waterbodies and overrun the exposed lands for agriculture and housing.

In the fairness of an inquiry, despite the deplorable record of human interventions in its life history, was the Pink-headed Duck at the end of its ecological journey? In an illuminating paper, Ericson et al. observed the following:

> The first molecular phylogenetic hypothesis for the possibly extinct pink-headed duck unambiguously shows that it belongs to the pochard radiation that also includes the genera *Aythya* and *Netta*. It is the sister to all modern-day pochards and belongs to a lineage that branched off from the others more than 2.8 million years ago. *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* is

> believed to never have been common in modern time and we show this has probably been the situation for as long as 100,000 years. Our results suggest that their effective population size varied between 15,000 and 25,000 individuals during the last 150,000 years of the Pleistocene. The reasons behind this are largely unknown as very little is known about the life-history and biology of this species. Presumably it is due to factors related to feeding or to breeding, but we may never know this for sure.[56]

Despite its antiquity, let us recall that the Pink-headed Duck was revealed to Western science through art.

Since that memorable day, nearly 250 years ago, when Bhawani Das picked up his brush, the Pink-headed Duck has been the subject of hundreds of artistic renditions – a *rara avis* aestivating in art. Extant literature is peppered with its likenesses, many of which can now be excavated on the Internet. All are worthy of viewing, for they evoke a strange nostalgia for a diorama now impossible to witness in the flesh. The first illustration of the duck in an Indian work was on Plate 34, in Thomas Jerdon's *Illustrations* in 1846.[57] But I have two other favourite pictures: a glorious plate by A. de Paret depicting a placid jheel, with one drake in the water and three on the near shore, viewed through a gap in the cattails. One of these is shown uttering its wheezing call with an uptilted head, effectively freezing time.[58] And the

other, a visceral close-up by Roland Green (1890–1972) of two drakes and a duck, swimming past the viewer.[59]

Black-and-white photographs of the birds in aviaries also exist on the Internet, and one showing ten together is full of pathos. And the reader must also look at a picture of this duck's globular egg.[60, 61]

I first saw a picture of the Pink-headed Duck when it stared back at me from the cover of my first bird book, Sálim Ali's path-breaking *The Book of Indian Birds* (1977).[62] It was in its tenth edition by the time the life-changing mystique of birds gripped me. But in a serendipitous coincidence, the bird had appeared for the first time in the sixth edition of this work,[63] in the year of my birth, 1961 – on a unique plate (No. 64, facing p. 127) – with two of the most endangered birds extant in India besides this duck: the Mountain Quail and the Jerdon's Courser; a fourth illustration was of the common Red-crested Pochard, perhaps placed there deliberately to illustrate the difference in the appearance of the two duck species and dispel any confusion that might arise from their colloquial name, '*Laal Sir*'. The plate was illustrated by the German artist Robert Scholz (1916–1977).[64]

I will close with one last, somewhat bizarre, anecdote regarding a special illustration of the Pink-headed Duck. On 23 November 1994, the postal department of the Government of India issued a set of four multicoloured commemorative postage stamps entitled 'Endangered Water Birds of India'. They had been painted by J.P. Irani, a favourite artist of Dr Sálim Ali. One of these was a

Rs 11 stamp featuring a pair of Pink-headed Ducks. The four stamps were designed, in philatelic terminology, as a se-tenant block of four. These were withdrawn immediately because the Madras Security Printers had negligently printed them with water-soluble inks! Now, whenever they surface in the philatelic markets, these rare stamps are snapped up by collectors at exorbitant prices. This surreal philatelic fiasco is, in a way, reflective of the strange journey of the enigmatic Pink-headed Duck – from the time of its discovery in a painting to its literal fading away from a postage stamp – all within the blink of 150-odd years. All the skins and eggs held in our museums are but sombre reminders of a magnificent dweller on Earth that once existed in a shared space with humanity but lived in its own world.

Any proclamation of extinction rings of a deadly finality, and yet it has been overturned within living memory in India, for at least two avian species – the nocturnal Jerdon's Courser, and the daylight-tolerating Forest Owlet. If '"Hope" is the thing with feathers',[65] then let us dare a similar fate for the Pink-headed Duck and believe that the 'absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence'.[66]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aasheesh Pittie is a birder, bibliographer and author. He is a co-founder of Indian BIRDS (indianbirds.in) and edited it for its first nineteen years. He is happiest among stacks of books in libraries, or outdoors, experiencing nature. He has created the Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology (southasiaornith.in), a free online database which is also now on the Zotero platform under the same title. His ongoing work, *An Author Bibliography of South Asian Ornithology, 1713–2022* is also online: https://linktr.ee/indiancourser. Besides, he has authored *Birds in Books: Three Hundred Years of South Asian Ornithology: A Bibliography* (Permanent Black, 2010), *The Written Bird: Birds in Books 2* (Indian BIRDS Monograph 4, 2022) and *The Living Air: The Pleasures of Birds and Birdwatching* (Juggernaut, 2023).

When not occupied by the above, Aasheesh can be found immersed in a book, in Indian or Western classical music or in the reality-bending insights of spiritualism.