

# DELHI & SHIMLA MARCH 2008

## – OKHLA BARRAGE, BLOSSOM, NARKANDA AND THE TARADEVI TEMPLE

by Petri Hottola



On the last week of March, 2008, I had a pleasure to attend the ATLAS Backpacker Research Group conference in Shimla, India. Even though it was primarily a professional visit, with time-consuming transportation arrangements, some time could be spent for birdwatching the Western Himalayas around Shimla (Blossom, Narkanda & Taradevi Temple), and visiting the Okhla Barrage in Delhi. Here are some short notes on the sites and some of the birds seen there. Overall, March proved to be a good time to visit both Delhi and Shimla, the weather being predominantly sunny, with some afternoon rain and hail showers on the mountains. It was quite refreshing in the Himalayas at the time of early spring, with a chance to walk on the melting snow at the higher altitudes, above 3300 meters. Please, keep in mind that several of the species which will be mentioned in the report are in fact are altitudinal migrants or wander after food sources in the non-breeding season. Conditions do vary between years and one should therefore not expect to find everything as portrayed in this report. Photographs have been included to provide an idea of the habitats at each site. Rs refers to Indian rupees (IRS), the local currency. One thousand IRS equals 15 euro.

### Accommodation

In Delhi, my accommodation was the central but peaceful Yatri House ([www.yatrihouse.com](http://www.yatrihouse.com); email [yatri@snl.com](mailto:yatri@snl.com)), tucked in the back of a side street few minutes from the Connaught Place, the centre of New Delhi. The Yatri House had modern rooms with wide screen televisions, drinks and breakfast for Rs3600 per night. Breakfast and meals were available and the manager arrange my train tickets, airport shuttle (one way included in the room rate), taxis and other services with good reliability, for the right price. Motor-rickshaws are available at the side street gate (guarded), by the main street. It was Rs40 to Connaught Place, one way. Remember to buy your field guides beforehand. The bookstores of Delhi are not known for their variety in natural history, and chances of finding the Rasmussen guide, for example, are next to nil.

In Shimla, I had reserved a room at the Peterhof, one of the ATLAS BRG conference hotels. They were hosting the first day of the conference, with the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh attending. Peterhof proved to be a place akin of Faulty Towers, arguably even more bizarre... To start with, my confirmed reservation was not available, even though the place was practically empty. It is a Government of Himachal Pradesh residence, not really available (or recommended) for tourists. I had to move to the five star Oberoi Shimla the next door, the other conference choice. Fortunately, a room could be negotiated for a very, very special rate (normally, Rs7000 per night). Oberoi with its opulent dining and luxury services is not really the first choice for birders who pay their bills by themselves. There is good variety of accommodation in Shimla and on the surrounding hills, the better (more peaceful) ones being located at the Oberoi end of the town.



**Fig. 1.** Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Prem Kumar Dhumal, arrives at the ATLAS conference.



**Fig. 2.** My bed at Oberoi Shimla; a rare treat for a travelling birder.

## Transportation

In Delhi, the Yatri House is normally able to arrange transportation (a car and a driver) to Okhla Barrage. The 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2008 was, however, an exception. It was the day of the Holi, a Hindu celebration and one of the few common holidays in India, and most of the Hindu taxi drivers in Delhi were going to be drunk, spraying their neighbors with colors and partying until they dropped down. Therefore, my only option were the Muslims, who would not join the festival and would abstain from alcohol. For them, I had to look for myself, as Hindu entrepreneurs tend not to network with Muslims. Fortunately, excellent service and a fair rate were discovered at the RSB Tourist Agency, downstairs of the Connaught Hotel. They charged Rs2000 for a day trip to Okhla Barrage and the driver was at the Yatri House gate at 5.25 the next morning, five minutes before the agreed time. He was good company and we had some interesting conversations on the way, on marriage arrangements, for example. We did the trip by Tata Indica.

Train is the most comfortable way to travel from Delhi to Shimla, or at least to Kalka, below Shimla. Shatabdi Express from Delhi to Kalka was fast and comfortable, and inexpensive as well. After a fourteen year break since my last visit to India, I was surprised to see such a European style train there, in addition to the new highways, buses and bus tops in Delhi, which has really changed since the 1990s. At Kalka, one may either take a taxi to Shimla (2 hours) or the Shimla 'toy train' (5+ h). I took the train and lived to regret it. The engine broke down four kilometers before Shimla station and I had to take my luggage off and walk on the railway track, to the nearest road. I did, however, see some birds from the slow, frequently stopping train with open windows. The best one was a nice **Collared Grosbeak**.

My trouble with the train proved to be a blessing in disguise. The taxi I met on the road happened to belong to an honest company run by good, professional people and I could negotiate all my trips with its manager on our way to hotel, by the driver's mobile phone. The moment which made it clear that I could trust the company was as follows: I requested for a price to Blossom (Chail) and back, full day, mentioning a rate of Rs2500, as stated by Lonely Planet (information collected couple of years earlier). "No, it is not that much. We can take you there for Rs1900", said the manager. Those who have been to India know how rare this is, especially when a tourist who has just arrived somewhere starts to ask for prices. A trip to Narkanda and back was Rs2000, respectively. The Taradevi Temple is relatively close to Shimla, 18 km, and visible from there. The rate for Taradevi was Rs1200. We made the trips by a Tata Sumo, a 2WD 4x4 look-a-like with high clearance (always a plus, even though the roads were good).

The company which I am recommending here is Band Box Heights & Valleys and the manager is Anil Bhardwaj. He can be reached either by email, [bboxhv@satyam.net.in](mailto:bboxhv@satyam.net.in), or by mobile phone (98160-61160). My drivers were Bobby (for local trips) and Lovely (to Delhi). I had some slight problems with Bobby, because he did not fully grasp the idea of waiting at a certain spot and picking me up further on, at given times. He was, however, punctual in the mornings and did take me up and down safely, knowing good places for provisions and meals. By the end of the conference, I discovered that return train timetables could actually not take me to Delhi International Airport on the required time. The BBH&V arranged a taxi for Rs7000, which I shared with two British colleagues, eager to use the opportunity. Not a bad rate for a 10 hour taxi drive! The poor Lovely had to do the distance twice, on the same day, returning another 10 hours without customers. One **Laggar Falcon** was seen close to Ambala, on a telephone line.



**Fig. 3.** Shatabdi Express to Kalka arrives at New Delhi railway station, platform one.

### **Okhla Barrage**

Also known as Okhla Island, this wetland reserve on the Yamuna River, on the border of the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, is well known among birders but hardly known among the majority of Delhites. It is an important wintering site for thousands of geese, wildfowl and shorebirds, and has three resident species of special interest: **White-tailed Stone-Chat**, **Striated Babbler** and **Bristled Grassbird**. Some site information and a checklist can be found at [www.anandarya.com/obp\\_html/location.html](http://www.anandarya.com/obp_html/location.html), including a rough map with locations for bird observation, even though not for the above-mentioned target species. Drive first to Kalindi Kunj, southeast of Delhi, and head for the barrage. The entrance gate is on the left, 100 meters before state border with a toll booth. Because of the Holi the main gate was closed. Consequently, we did not pay for the entrance (Rs350+Rs50 for car!). On the other hand, we had to use a back entrance in Uttar Pradesh, therefore paying Rs250 for crossing the state line, and Rs25 for the return entrance at the toll gate. Beyond the toll booth, turn left (tarmac) and again left after a bridge, to the narrow barrage road (tarmac; **Figure 4**). You will arrive at the Bush Bird Point (cf. the Internet page).



**Fig. 4.** The Okhla Barrage track towards Bittern Point; people like to jog and walk there, in addition to birdwatching. There are offices and factories close by, in the expanding metropol.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, there were over 8.000 wildfowl (5.000 **Shovelers**), 24 **Bar-headed Geese** (late season, the majority had gone), 80 **Painted Storks**, 5.000 shorebirds (e.g. 2.000 **Ruff**, 1.200 **Black-winged Stilts** and 800 **Black-tailed Godwits**), 120 **Great Black-headed Gulls** and 600 **Black Kites**, in addition to 100+ other species. The best records included a **Yellow Bittern**, an immature **Pallas's Fish Eagle**, two **Pintail Snipes**, two **Terek Sandpipers**, three **River Lapwings**, four **Pale Martins** and a **Smoky Warbler**.

For the key target species, continue to the Bittern Point and turn left (sand/gravel) just before reaching another entrance gate (on the right). Go to the end of the road. There is a platform where the car can be parked. Opposite, an area of ponds, wet grass and reed beds had all the three species. **White-tailed Stonechats** had three territories on the left. **Striated Babblers** preferred bushes by the perimeter fence on the right. A lone **Bristled Grassbird** gave stunning views as I approached the water's edge, with cows and water buffaloes. The latter with small calves were a bit suspicious of me, but there were no conflicts. I spent some time exploring the reed beds, along cow paths, until the afternoon became unbearably hot (+35 C). The **Grassbird** is probably difficult to locate; I considered myself lucky for not only seeing it, but for having such a perfect view. Five **Nilgais** were also a bit surprising, so close to a major city.



**Fig. 5.** Some of the wintering birds at Okhla: mostly **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Black-winged Stilts**, with some wildfowl and **Brown-headed Gulls**. The site for target species is on the other side, in the reed beds between the buildings & perimeter fence and the open water.



**Fig. 6.** **Water Buffaloes** will meet you on the other side. No need to be afraid, I suppose.



**Fig. 7.** A few Nilgai may also be present.



**Fig. 8.** Outskirts of Shimla, with the characteristic steep slopes with coniferous forest. A variety of more common bird species may be observed right in the city.



**Fig. 9.** A colorful demonstration in Shimla: Bharatiya Yanata Party (BJP) had gained power in Himachal Pradesh and closed all day care centers, thousands of women thereby losing their jobs.

### **Blossom (Chail)**

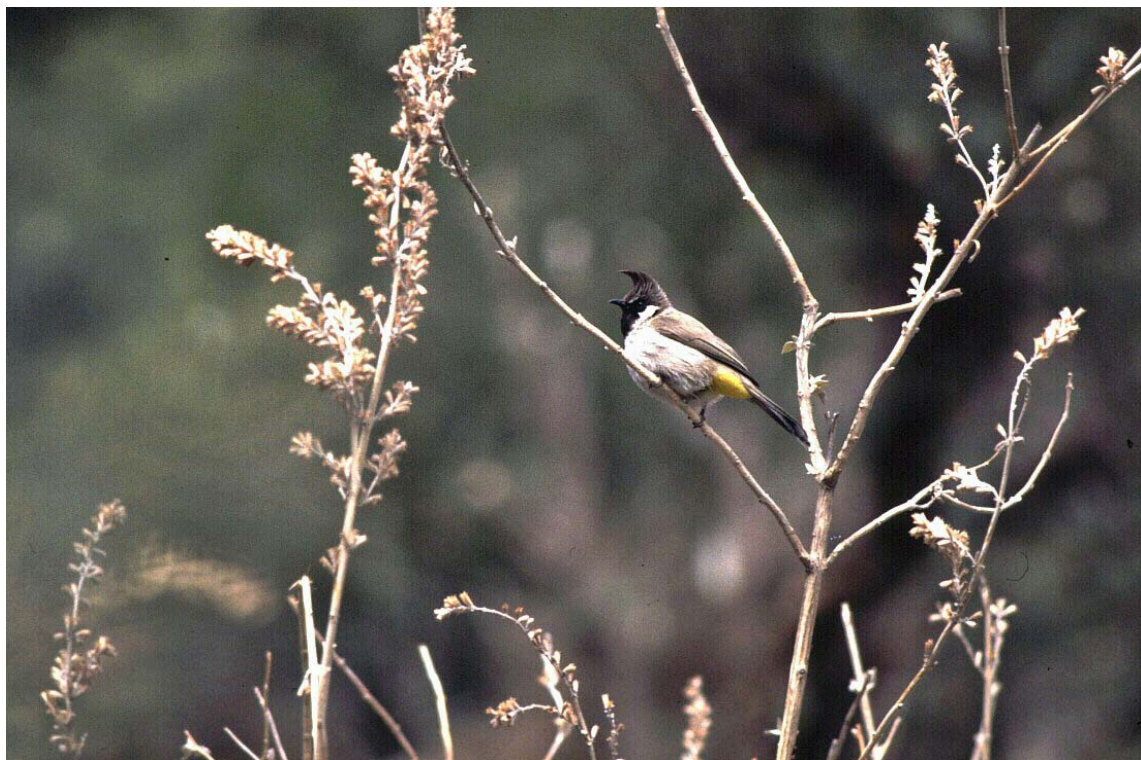
It is a 1.45 – 2 hour drive from Shimla to Chail. At Blossom (2800 m), there is a breeding centre for the endangered **Cheer Pheasant**, a species of limited and patchy distribution. More importantly, there are wild pheasants around on the scrubby slope below the centre. With luck and persistence, they may be located by calls, when they respond to the male calling from the breeding centre cage (**Figure 10**). I eventually scored with one. **Kalij Pheasants** were more common, in the forest. The breeding centre is a bit difficult to locate, not being visible from the close by gravel road, but it is right below a well known temple of Kali. From the temple access road, walk 100 meters down along one of the several paths and small buildings start to appear, the pheasant cage being on the right, on the sunny, open slope. From there on, there are two alternative trails forward. The left one goes down to mature forest with its birds species and the right one follows the dry, open slope. I did both of these, one in the morning and another one in the afternoon, even though most of the time was spent close to the centre, scanning the slope with a telescope. There is an observation tower. Meals can be had at the close-by Chail, for Rs100.

A pair of **Variegated Laughingthrushes** was the second best record for the site. **Himalayan Griffons** and **Lammergeiers** soared over the ridge, just like at the other Shimla sites. Two **Altai Accentors** were looking for food on the right hand path. Only one **White-cheeked Nuthatch** was seen singing on top of a spruce, together with **Black-lored Tits** and a **Scaly-bellied Woodpecker**. The four species of **Leaf-Warblers** included two **Western Crowned**. Otherwise, the common Himalayan forest bird species. A family of four **Ghorals** was frequently observed on the dry slope.





**Fig. 10.** Blossom: The temple of Kali on top, **Cheer Pheasant** Breeding Centre down below. On the right, the observation hide.



**Fig. 11.** **Himalayan Bulbul**, one of the common bird species on the mountains.

## Narkanda

Narkanda is a well-known ski-resort village two hours north of Shimla on a good road, and also an easy to access site for high altitude coniferous forests close to alpine moors. After Narkanda, the road is not open year around. In March 2008, it was closed by snow about 40 km further on. Also the access (tarmac, narrow) to the Hattu Peak ski resort at Narkanda was cut by snow. Consequently, not many people had interest to go up to the mountain. The few other outdoors enthusiasts I met there happened to include a British Chief Lord Justice and his wife, with a sizable Government of India escort, including an ambulance and armed security. The road was open for about four kilometers, beyond and artificial pond (km 3) and a parking site about one kilometer steep uphill, from where one had to walk on snow to get higher up (3300 – 3400 m). Most of the time was spent in the forest around the artificial pond and uphill. In the afternoons, we also visited a valley side road which goes down right at the Hattu Peak junction (second after Narkanda). In there, some fields and streamside deciduous forest were discovered, with great variety of **Leaf-Warblers**, with seven species including a few **Ashy-throated** and **Hodgson's (Plain) Mountain Finches**.



**Fig. 12.** Spring flowers emerge as soon as snow smelts – Narkanda, Hattu Peak access road.

A particularly productive section of the Hattu Peak road was the grassy mounds and depressions with large trees right next to and 100 meters below the km 3 artificial pond (**Figure 13**). In the mornings, this area teemed with birds, particularly thrushes, including dozens of **Black-throated Thrushes**, three **White-collared Blackbirds** and a **Grey-winged Blackbird**. **Black-and-Yellow** and

**Spot-winged Grosbeaks** were numerous on the first visit and easy to observe. On the second time, three days later, I saw only few. **White-cheeked Nuthatches** were common, together with **Grey-crested** (restricted range), **Spot-winged** and **Rufous-naped Tits**, and woodpeckers (**Himalayan, Fulvous-breasted**). **White-throated Tits**, another target species, were there, but not that easy to locate. I saw seven, all together. Among the West Himalayan specials, **Orange Bullfinch** was the most difficult one for me. On the first visit, I probably heard one. On the second, I finally scored with a single bird.



**Fig. 13.** The good section, next to the artificial pond (edge can be seen on the right) and forward.

**Koklass Pheasants** frequented the low grass by the road, whereas **Himalayan Monals** called from the opposite (right hand) slope. The latter species was difficult to observe, the birds spending their time at the edge of the forest in a depression between the slopes, where snow, grassy spots and rhododendron met. One needs to go down to get better views and do it slowly and without noise. One **Blue-capped Rock Thrush** had already arrived on its breeding grounds, just like a pair of **Fire-capped Tits** which were actively building a nest close to the artificial pond. **Flycatchers** included a **Dark-sided, Rufous-gorgeted** and an **Ultramarine Flycatcher**, the last down in the valley, together with **Grey-headed Flycatchers**. A single male **Blue-fronted Redstart** was a joy to watch. The **Spotted Nutcrackers** of Narkanda are not the subspecies recently proposed for splitting.

All in all, the Hattu Peak access road and the cultivated areas close by proved to be better than I had dared to expect, with no prior knowledge of the sites. I was only prospecting, based on access, altitudes and Google Earth satellite images. The area would have been worth several visits. As a bonus, a **Himalayan Tahr** crossed the road in front of us, just before sunrise, on the second morning to Narkanda. It managed the steep slope rather well for a relatively heavy animal (if compared with **Ghoral**).



**Fig. 14.** Steep slopes along the Hattu Peak road; the valley of Thanedhar on the right, behind trees.



**Fig. 15.** Roadside backyards at Thanedhar; good habitat for **Accentors**, **Rosefinches** and others.

Close by, few km north along the main road, lies the village of **Thanedhar**. In there, the roadside fields, gardens and orchards, and backyards of houses proved to be very productive. The birds included four **Rufous-breasted Accentors**, a pair of **Red-mantled Rosefinches** and many more common species. A single **Yellow-billed Blue Magpie** followed a party of several **Red-bills** (be aware of the identification challenge presented by the West Himalayan subspecies). The best bird was, however, a huge adult **Upland Buzzard**, a species I had seen only once before. I stayed on a one kilometer stretch before and through the village, making observations from the road.

### **Taradevi Temple**

About 45 minutes from Shimla, the Temple of Taradevi is located on top of a high ridge. It is a landmark visible from a great distance, also from Shimla. A tarmac access road meanders up the hill, ending at a temple parking lot. Just before the lot, a distinctive track goes right, entering a good Sal forest on the rain-shadow slope, with some houses and a concrete path which descends all the way down to the Kalka – Shimla road. The forest had several **Barking Deer**. It probably is a good idea to go up to the temple by car and walk some distance down the concrete path on the other side, before returning up. The lower part of the path is disturbed by human habitation and traffic noise, and it is, after all, a steep climb uphill. The access road side of the hill, on the other hand, is dry, stony and scrubby, with pines. Good views of the surrounding mountains can be had from there, with soaring hawks and vultures, including **Griffon Vulture**.



**Fig. 16.** Taradevi access road on the dry slope, the temple on the top of the ridge.



**Fig. 17.** Birdy Sal forest behind the temple, with a path which turns into concrete later on.

The best bird of the Sal forest was a male **Chestnut Thrush**. **Grey-winged Thrushes** were common and a pair of **Grey-headed Woodpeckers** had a nest in the forest. A mixed party of jay-size birds offered a lot to watch and listen. It included up to 20 **Great Barbets**, 12 **Red-billed Blue Magpies**, 30 **Eurasian** and 25 **Lanceolated Jays**. A good variety of leaf-warblers, flycatchers and other small insectivorous birds were seen, as well, including a **Grey-sided Bush Warbler**. The dry side had two *caniceps* **Goldfinches**, 35 **Hodgson's (Plain) Mountain Finches**, **Russet Sparrows** (a few seen every day) and a pair of unidentified **Rosefinches**. I got a feeling that the Sal Forest side would have had more to see, time permitting. One morning visit is not enough to get the complete picture.

### **Epilogue**

On the flight to Helsinki on Finnair, I sat next to a Swedish lady who had a serious case of Delhi Belly as her travel souvenir. Somehow she managed to give it to me, as well, and I spent the next week in a state of fever (two days) and diarrhea (5 days). Good luck for your birding in India!