

Giant Redeye in Mumbai

Here is a story of the skipper Giant Redeye that Mumbai's butterfly enthusiasts would be ready to die for to have a sighting, which I was fortunate enough to watch emerge at my residence!

I live in a suburb of Mumbai, my housing society being situated exactly opposite the Western Express Highway at Malad. On February 11, 2013, I was on my normal evening walk, and stopped to admire some potted, Areca palms. Then I noticed a pure white creature with red spots, tying itself in tiny white strings onto the leaflets of the palm. What was it I thought, could it be a caterpillar? I had seen caterpillars of moths and butterflies, but had never come across something like this.

That reminded me of Mohit, a 6–7 year old child, who had once come to me holding a palm leaf along with a caterpillar saying *Ye le lo, aur mujhe butterfly banaake de do!* (Take this, make a butterfly and give it to me!). We had laughed – it was the Palm Bob Skipper. Though it was also on a palm leaflet, the appearance of the caterpillar was totally different and not 'scary' like this one. This had a few ochreous dorsal spots and marks, along with white thread-like strings spread around. As it grew, it looked increasingly scary to the extent that I was totally hesitant to touch it.



One day, I saw that it had covered itself fully in a roll of leaflet and it was not eating anymore. I watched it for two more days, and when it pupated, I took it home on February 17.

On February 22, I saw some movement in the roll and pure white powder started spreading all over. I went on observing it for a long time, and on loosening the roll, saw the pupa turning into a butterfly. But which butterfly could this be – a skipper – which one? I went on guessing, but never thought of Giant Redeye! In the morning, on checking, I got a surprise on seeing that it was the Giant Redeye! A species that was rare to spot in Mumbai had 'emerged' from my residence! I was thrilled with the experience and wish to share this with *Hornbill* readers. ■

Rekha Shahane, *Maharashtra*

Sálím Ali, you missed this one!

On March 29, 2014, returning from a float on the Ken river (Madhya Pradesh) at dusk, we spotted a heron sitting on a small midstream rock, happily picking off the water-skating beetles that surrounded it. My first thought was Little Green Heron (I'm of an age to still think in old 'Salim Ali names') i.e. Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*, but I was surprised to notice it had distinctly bright reddish-orange legs which made me head for the bird books on returning home.

Doubts crept in as the only books to hand, including Sálím Ali, Grimmett and Inskipps (both their Pocket Guide and the Helm Field Guide) and Kazmierczak's field guide, showed images of the bird with yellow or yellowish-green legs and descriptions that described it so also. The biggest surprise was to find no mention even in the Sálím Ali/Ripley Handbook of anything other than "yellowish leaf-green" legs. Sálím Ali is of course the guru for all of us and to date, no matter how weird and new a sighting of bird behaviour we have had, we would find that he had already recorded it.

Seems I had finally found an exception to this 'rule'. So I went to the internet – and found some red-legged Striated Heron images from other parts of the world, but not India – a subspecies characteristic, I wondered. But then with the help of more expert ornithological friends – with better access to



libraries – (thank you Dr. Asad Rahmani and Bikram Grewal) I found confirmation that it was a Striated Heron and also that the legs are recorded as changing colour during the breeding season. Since Sálím Ali records the breeding season as March to September, this would fit.

James Hancock and Sir Hugh Elliot seem to be the first to mention this in their *The Herons of the World* published in 1974 "...legs yellowish in immatures, more dusky or greenish yellow in adults, and bright yellow, orange or reddish in the nuptial phase." (London Editions Pp. 178–183). In *The Herons Handbook* published with James Kushlan in 1984, Hancock writes: "during courtship, the bill becomes glossy black, the lores deep blue-black, the iris deep orange, and the legs bright orangish red." (London Editions, Pp. 172–179). Some of the other courtship characteristics mentioned were not apparent (see photo) but the red legs did fit nicely. More recently (2005), Pamela Rasmussen and John C. Anderton

give this information in the second edition of their *Birds of South Asia – the Ripley Guide*, writing for the Striated Heron that it is “a small (*Ixobrychus*-sized) grey heron with mostly dark bill and short heavy yellowish legs... .bare facial skin yellowish and legs turn orange to reddish in breeding season.”

Whether this is always the case and earlier ornithologists merely failed to record it (red/green colour blindness sufferers?) or whether it only occurs occasionally is something we can all contribute to answering. My photos show that at least in Madhya Pradesh on the Ken river, this can happen.

As a little postscript – I think perhaps Sálim Ali may have been less than enamoured of these small herons as he also fails to note an extremely interesting habit of this bird. It is well recorded (in literature and on Youtube!) that the Striated Heron sometimes uses bait for fishing. The bait may be a bit of bread stolen from a human fisherman, an insect or even a bit of twig. The bird will float it on the water (sometimes many times) to attract an appropriate-sized fish that it will then grab. Yet another non-human tool user! ■

Joanna Van Gruisen, *Madhya Pradesh*

Sunbirds in my balcony!

Last year when I returned from Delhi after a holiday, I saw a structure hanging from my clothesline in the balcony. It was made up of some pieces of polythene strips, threads, tattered cotton, and also twigs and dry leaves. It did not have a proper shape. I opened the window to get a better view to understand what it was. I had barely been there for a minute when two little birds, hardly 8 or 10 cm in size, started tweeting ceaselessly, sitting on the other side of the railing. It did not take me much time to understand that these were the ones trying to make their nest. I quietly closed the window and drew the curtains, and then my fixation for the next 45 days began!

Every morning, afternoon and till late in the evening, I would sit next to the window and watch the sunbird

couple making hundreds of trips, and bringing a variety of materials to build their nest. Hiding behind the curtain and keeping just enough parting for the camera lens, I took pictures and videos of the happenings. I saw the nest taking shape, and when complete, found the mother sitting inside, presumably waiting for the eggs to hatch. She sat there day and night, going out once in a while for her feed. When the mother went out, the father would stand guard. When the mother returned the father would go away. Then one day, I found the mother was making repeated trips again and this time returned with some worms in her beak. She would feed the eager chicks, not visible yet and go back to fetch more. The father too took active part in the feeding.

One day I found the chicks impatient. Probably, they were growing fast and needed more and more food, which the parent found difficult to cope with. Pushing each other, they tried to come out of the nest. One morning when I went near the window I found the father peeping into the nest but finding no one he flew away. The chicks were gone, which saddened me – what happened?

I do not have a very advanced camera, and did not open the glass shutters of the windows to not disturb the birds, so the results are not of good quality, especially since I took the pictures against the light, many are just silhouettes. But I felt like sharing my delightful experience, so it is. ■

Bandana Bagchi
Madhya Pradesh



ABOUT THE POSTER

KEDAR BHIDE

Theobald's Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus theobaldi*

Theobald's Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus theobaldi*, popularly called the Snow Lizard, is probably the only reptile found beyond 4,500 m above msl. A small viviparous agamid, it is found in large numbers around high altitude lakes of Ladakh during summers. It is active during the summer months (June–August), and hibernates during the rest of the year. Its viviparous nature helps in completing breeding in such a short

(2 to 3 months) activity period.

This terrestrial, 2 to 3.5 inch long lizard inhabits temperate deserts and montane grassland and shrubland. It is distributed from Xinjiang and Tibet to Nepal, and Jammu and Kashmir in India. *P. theobaldi* has been assessed as Least Concern because it has a large distribution and is not being impacted by any major threats.

The typical toad-headed agama strategy is to 'sit and wait' while hunting for food. You will find them on rocks around high altitude lakes waiting for insects. Their role in these specific ecological niche has not been studied yet, and not much is known about their life cycle in these cold deserts of the high altitude. If you visit the lakes in Ladakh, don't forget to look for these amazing reptiles.

The individual in this image was photographed on the banks of Tso-Moriri lake in the Ladakh region. Though a detailed taxonomic study was not undertaken, and the systematics of toad-headed agamas are quite complicated, morphological characters and distribution supports our identification of *Phrynocephalus theobaldi*. ■