

Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana*: a new species for Nepal

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In spring 1990 I visited the Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve in eastern Nepal. It is in the *terai* just north of the Kosi dam at 26°36'N 87°03'E. From 15 February to 3 March I was the only ornithologist based at Kusaha, the reserve headquarters, where I devoted my entire time either to watching birds or to keeping my records of them up to date.

I make notes and coloured sketches of birds before consulting any outside source of reference. In the case of skulking birds such as crakes and rails this is invaluable, otherwise a view that lasts only for seconds could easily be dismissed later as wishful thinking when the bird in question turns out to be rare. Near Kusaha there is a shallow swamp with reeds growing in the water and providing cover for Ruddy-breasted Crakes *Porzana fusca* and a few Baillon's Crakes *P. pusilla*. I spent hours by this swamp, waiting, watching and sketching, with a special interest in the crakes.

On 28 February it was raining at dawn and the rest of the morning was cool and overcast, so many birds were much more active than usual. Some time between 08h30 and 09h00, I heard an insistent 'peep, peep, peep' like the call of a day-old chick but much louder and more penetrating and repeated for some time; a Spotted Crake *Porzana porzana* was standing in the shallow water between reeds. Before the bird sneaked into the nearest cover, I clearly saw numerous fine white spots very regularly arranged in lines down the breast and forming bars on the flanks, where they were slightly larger. The bird also had some white speckles on the mantle, which was otherwise streaked light and dark brown, and the face markings consisted of a grey supercilium, fawn cheek patch and a tapering dark brown malar stripe. However the bill appeared pale brown. I did not notice the red or orange base mentioned in most books. The bird was slightly larger than a nearby Ruddy-breasted Crake.

The Spotted Crake had apparently been present on the evening of 26 February in the same place, where I saw a bird that was generally similar in colour to, but larger than, a Baillon's Crake, creeping between reeds. The Spotted and Ruddy-breasted Crakes are 21.5 cm long and the Baillon's Crake is 19 cm long (King *et al.* 1975). Although the bird was quite close, fading light and intervening reeds prevented me from seeing plumage detail on this occasion, but the Ruddy-breasted Crakes were present to give a size comparison.

On 2 March I heard the Spotted Crake in the same place at about 07h00, and on 3 March the crakes and rails of the swamp were extremely active, scuttling in and out of cover from sunrise to about 07h30. I briefly saw the Spotted Crake again, partly concealed by reeds. The face pattern confirmed its identity but the only other plumage visible was the tertiaries and

surrounding feathers, which had broad dark brown centres and light brown edges.

This swamp harboured no less than eight members of the rail family. As well as the Spotted Crake and the two other species already mentioned, a flock of Purple Swamphens *Porphyrio porphyrio*, the Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* and an occasional Common Coot *Fulica atra*, I saw a Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* on 1 March, which turned out to be the fourth record for Nepal and the first at Kosi Tappu, and a Water Rail *R. aquaticus* on several occasions between 25 February and 3 March, which was apparently the sixth record for Nepal. If the Spotted Crake was the only rarity of my visit I would assume it to be a very scarce vagrant. However, it seems a great coincidence for three such vagrants of the same family to converge on the same marsh in the same week. A more likely explanation could be that at least one of these species and probably all three occur from time to time at Kosi Tappu in small numbers, but have been overlooked because of their skulking habits. Also, as far as I know, relatively few ornithologists seem to visit Kosi Tappu and devote the time necessary to looking for them.

Although the Kosi Tappu reserve is officially protected, regrettably the habitat is threatened. On 24 February a trespasser on the reserve set fire to the grass at one end of the swamp and, but for the intervention of the warden, Mr Gopal Upadhyay, his wife and myself the whole swamp could have been laid waste above the waterline, as the reeds were dry enough to burn, and the birds driven out. Unfortunately these illegal fires are common.

REFERENCE

King, B. F., Dickinson, E. C. and Woodcock, M. W. (1975) *A field guide to the birds of South-East Asia*. London: Collins.

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