

## Prey items of the Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris*

TAEJ MUNDKUR

During the course of my study from 1985 to 1990 on the breeding biology of the River Tern *Sterna aurantia* at freshwater reservoirs around Rajkot city (22°18'N 70°47'E), in western India, I had the opportunity to make some observations on the prey items fed to developing chicks of the Great Thick-knee *Esacus recurvirostris*. This species nests on the dry banks of the reservoirs, on transient islands, and sometimes in a colony of the terns during the dry season from March to July.

Seven chicks of the Great Thick-knee were caught and ringed over the six-year period, and for this I handled them 17 times. On three occasions, the chicks had a bulge at the base of the throat indicating the presence of food, which was retrieved by first massaging the throat and then gently easing the bolus out of the open gape. These were immediately preserved in 10% formalin for identification. In all, seven prey items were collected. The largest prey was a complete young Indian Monitor Lizard *Varanus bengalensis*, with a total length of 21.2 cm and weighing 10.8 g. The animal was intact except for the head that was battered in the region of the forehead and snout. This was collected from a downy chick weighing about 100 g. The second bolus was an intact Anderson's Shrew *Suncus stoliczkanus*, weighing 4.5 g and measuring 6.3 cm and 10.6 cm from tip of the snout to base and tip of the tail respectively. The third bolus contained two complete cyprinid fish *Salmostoma bacaila* (Hamilton) with a total length of 8.3 and 8.6 cm and weighing 2 g each, along with the lower jaw of a rodent, identified as such by the distinctive dentition. The fish is an abundant shoaling species and is found in shallow water in these reservoirs; it forms a large part of the diet of the tern. Two live winged termites, clinging by their pincers to the upper palate of a chick, were also collected; these constituted the smallest items of prey.

The usual prey of the Great Thick-knee are crabs, though they are also thought to eat frogs, molluscs, insects and other small animals (Ali and Ripley 1983). There is a single record of a bird eating the eggs of a Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* (Dharmakumarsinhji 1954). It is likely that crabs form a major part of the diet in the marine habitats that the species also frequents both in India and elsewhere. The reservoirs in my study area do not support large populations of crabs.

These reservoirs are oligotrophic in nature and contain little food that the Great Thick-knee can utilize. This might make the bird more dependent on terrestrial prey as suggested by the regurgitates collected. The monitor lizard, which was retrieved from the chick at about 12h30, reflects the diurnal foraging habits of this otherwise crepuscular and nocturnal species (Ali and Ripley 1983), at least during the chick-rearing stage.

All the prey recovered are likely to have been caught by the adults, except possibly the live termites, which could have been caught by the chick itself, as it was nearly fledged and weighed well over 300 g.

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- Taej Mundkur, Department of Biosciences, Saurashtra University, Rajkot 360 005, India.

## Field identification and ecology of the Greater Goldenback *Chrysocolaptes lucidus* in Malaysia

RICHARD A. NOSKE

The Greater Goldenback (or Flame-back) *Chrysocolaptes lucidus* and Common Goldenback *Dimopium javanense* are broadly sympatric in southern Asia, from India to Borneo (Short 1973, King *et al.* 1975). In Thailand, the Greater Goldenback outnumbers the Common Goldenback, and occurs in a wider variety of habitats (Short 1973, Round 1988). However, in Peninsular Malaysia, the converse is true, and the Greater Goldenback is restricted to mangroves (Medway and Wells 1976, Wells 1985). During the course of a study of the birds in mangrove forests, I made observations of both species on the west coast of Selangor, Peninsular Malaysia. The purpose of this note is to clarify the field characteristics of the Greater Goldenback and to review its habitat preferences in this region.

### *Field identification*

King *et al.* (1975) state that the Greater Goldenback can be separated from the Common Goldenback 'with difficulty' by its larger size, larger bill, four toes and two black malar stripes which fuse on the cheeks. In addition the black crown of the female Greater Goldenback is spotted rather than streaked as in the female Common Goldenback. However none of these characteristics is easily discernible in the field. Size is difficult to judge, and the number of toes is rarely distinguishable from a distance.