

Letters to the Editor

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* feeding on five-striped palm squirrel *Funambulus pennantii*

On 22 January 2013, around 1800 hrs, I was photographing birds at Ranmal Lake (known popularly as Lakhota Lake), Jamnagar, when my attention was drawn towards a House Crow *Corvus splendens* chasing a Five-striped Palm Squirrel *Funambulus pennantii* on the walls surrounding the lake. The squirrel tried to evade its pursuer by trying to hide in possible gaps in the wall, but failed in doing so since the walls had recently been cemented afresh. The squirrel finally slipped and fell into the water where a Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* was quick to pounce on it before it could swim away.



Clasping the squirrel in its beak, the heron repeatedly plunged it in water in an attempt to drown it. When the squirrel finally stopped moving, the heron swallowed it whole. The Grey Heron is an opportunistic feeder and its diet is known to comprise molluscs, crustaceans, reptiles, small birds, plant matter, fish, eels, and occasionally, small mammals (Kushlan & Hancock 2004).

Hardy (1978) reports a similar incident from April 1976 wherein he found two newborn grey squirrels *Sciurus carolinensis* among prey taken by Grey Herons to their nest in Combermere, Chesire, England. The observation in this note could be the first such instance recorded from India.

Acknowledgements

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– Ashvin Trivedi

Jalani Jar, Bajaria Fali, Near Pancheshwar, Jamnagar, Gujarat, India.
 Email: snapchaserashvintrivedi@yahoo.com

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Self-explanatory titles? Or more care required by authors, reviewers and editors? A reply to Kannan & James (2010).

Kannan & James (2010) provide an interesting, but unusual commentary on the appearance of errors in the literature, which they attribute, in part, to poorly-worded titles. Besides

magnanimously assuming the responsibility for the failure of other authors to read their work properly (Kannan 1993; Sreekar & Srinivasulu 2010), they include the following statement:

“In this age of the information super highway with ready access to titles and citations, but often not whole documents, authors often yield to the temptation to cite from titles without reading the whole paper. Sometimes authors are unable (or simply too busy or lazy!) to look up the original papers and therefore resort to citing from secondary sources.”

It is odd that Kannan & James (2010) interpret the age of the information super highway as one of difficult access to literature, when it seems quite clear that the opposite is true. There is a plethora of online sources of literature available to researchers (this journal being one of them!), not to mention the fact that citation databases, more often than not, provide contact details for authors even when the full document is not available for downloading. In addition to this, there is the tried and tested method of requesting documents from a local library, which worked for authors in the not too distant past, and even the use of social media, telephone books, snail mail, and a wealth of other means of telecommunications to contact the publishers, authors of the material, or even their associates in order to obtain a reference copy. Literature is more accessible than ever, and in the extremely rare cases when a thorough and properly-conducted search fails to locate a copy of a required paper, there is simply no valid excuse for authors citing a document that they have been unable to consult, without making it quite clear that this was the case. The suggestion that somebody may be “too busy” to properly check their sources, yet have enough time on their hands to dedicate to a practice that requires they do just that, stretches the boundaries of reasonability.

Whilst we are all capable of errors of interpretation, especially when dealing with documents written in a language that is not our own, it seems to me counter-productive in the extreme to justify the unscientific practice of authors who, “merely glance at a title and jump into egregiously erroneous conclusions,” by even suggesting that the wording of titles is a causal factor in the errors resulting from this behaviour. In fact, it may be argued, rewording titles so as to appease those individuals that take such short cuts is a step towards justifying this unprofessional practice, and hence may be more likely to encourage its proliferation in ornithology rather than to eradicate it.

The examples provided by the authors as, “good titles,” fail to convince me that they deliver the dubious benefits claimed. For example, even under the criteria that the authors promote, “Wild Great Hornbills do not use mud to seal nest cavities,” (James & Kannan 2007) is not, to my mind, “much better,” than, “On the nest sealing material used by wild Great Hornbills,” as, in itself, it leaves the reader no closer to knowing what wild Great Hornbills actually do use to seal their cavities other than it not being mud. James & Kannan (2007) conclude that nest-sealing material is composed, “exclusively of fecal material,” meaning that, “Wild Great Hornbills use fecal material and not mud to seal nest cavities,” would surely have been the “best” title to use in this instance.

Alternatively, “House Sparrows associated with reduced Cliff Swallow nesting success” (Leasure *et al.* 2010), is not “much less likely to be misconstrued,” than, “Effect of House Sparrows on the nesting success of Cliff Swallows.” In fact it potentially encourages the “lazy” biologist who elects not to read more than a title to perhaps erroneously assume that ALL reduced nesting success in Cliff Swallows can be attributable to House Sparrows, whereas

in fact numerous additional factors have been postulated (Emlen 1952; Samuel 1969, 1971; Stewart 1972; Grant & Quay 1977; Brown & Brown 1987, 1991; Brown *et al.* 2000). The latter title enables the reader to draw no such sweeping conclusion and hence demands a thorough reading of the article, allowing the data to be analysed on its merits and resulting in a better understanding of the issues involved.

Clearly, choice and interpretation of titles involves an element of opinion, but this just demonstrates why any conclusion drawn from reading a title alone represents bad science and should never occur in lieu of a thorough reading of the text that follows it. Of course a title should aim to be informative, but the suggestion that it must attempt to encapsulate ALL of the text it introduces is absurd. As the aim of every scientist is for his or her work to be read by their peers, I struggle to understand why promoting the employment of titles designed to help people to avoid doing so is in any way desirable either for the author or for the reader.

The proper practice of scientific publication requires authors to assume the responsibility for the content of their manuscripts, including any unforeseen errors within them. The peer review method employed by scientific publications then acts as a form of quality control, where qualified individuals, who assess the methodology, examine a submission, conclusions AND literature cited by the authors before making a recommendation as to whether or not it is acceptable for publication. Thus, when this system is properly employed, such errors as those arising from reading a title and incorrectly assuming knowledge of the content will be detected.

Consequently I would contend that rather than blaming the corner-cutting behaviour of a minority of authors on those who see brevity of titles as a virtue, that the responsibility for these easily avoidable errors be properly cast where it belongs, at an unmethodical approach associated with obviating good practice, rushing to publish and a failure to properly research conclusions prior to submission.

I thank Kannan & James (2010) for bringing this unfortunate practice to light and hope that it will act as a warning to the editors of scientific journals that the quality of their publication is measured by the quality of the contents and not the quantity of papers it publishes. Though journal editors operate in an environment of ever-present deadlines and frequently must deal with tardy authors and reviewers, the correct and thorough implementation of the peer review process is an obligation that they are charged to fulfil.

For their part, authors and reviewers have a responsibility in facilitating the correct application of this process by thoroughly researching the work they submit or review, and drawing attention to the very rare instances when, despite all best efforts, they have been unable to personally consult a cited reference. Furthermore such instances should be considered acceptable only when the reference in question is a minor one, and for reasons that one would assume are obvious, not when it is key to the entire work.

Errors will still slip through the cracks from time to time, but ethical authors will assume full responsibility for them and correct them whenever necessary.

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—Paul Smith

¹ Fauna Paraguay, Encarnación, Paraguay.

² Para La Tierra, Reserva Natural Laguna Blanca, Santa Rosa del Aguaray, San Pedro, Paraguay.

E-mail: faunaparaguay@gmail.com

Response to Paul Smith's letter

We fully agree with Smith that more care should be exercised by authors, reviewers, and editors; that was never in dispute. Nowhere in our article did we even insinuate that authors can “get away” with using titles only. Smith seems to believe that self-explanatory titles and diligent care are mutually exclusive. We contend that both should go hand-in-hand to enable scientific articles serve their purpose, which is the advancement of scientific knowledge and communication of this information efficiently for the global scientific community.

Smith wrongly feels that in this age of the information super highway, scientific articles are readily available. Anyone who has worked on major literature compilations will have been stymied by papers being available only as titles or abstracts. While it is incumbent upon authors to read all the papers they cite, the realistic truth is that authors often resort to citing only by looking at titles. Some authors (especially students) would rather cite from titles than pay up to \$50 for an article! If the editor of *Indian BIRDS* had not posted the entire Kannan & James (2010) article on the website, Smith could not have accessed it with ease. He might have had to pay for it and/or wait for it to come via an interlibrary loan. This is true especially for many “gray literature” sources, which are not indexed, but carry substantial information of scientific value. In the U.S.A., many state-level bird journals do not post their contents on the web in their entirety, or if they do, their contents are available only for subscribers. One of the best-used online databases, BioOne, is available only by subscription at quite a formidable rate, often affordable only to organizations like universities.

We do not understand Smith's tortuous argument that self-explanatory titles may need to convey even more information for them to be of any value, and that no title can be self-explanatory enough. Titles, by their very nature, should be terse. Any attempt to convey the various nuances and all of the information will require titles to get too verbose and unwieldy. There is no

need for authors to pack titles with the plethora of information contained in the main text. We reiterate that, as far as possible, the gist of the information must be in the title. We made sound arguments with examples to support why that is necessary.

—Ragupathy Kannan & Douglas A. James
E-mail: ragupathy.kannan@gmail.com
djames@uark.edu

Response to Dr Santharam's letter in Indian BIRDS vol. 8 no. 4.

We thank Santharam (2013) for drawing attention to Prasad (2004). Prasad (2004) reported that the Grey-headed Fish Eagle was recorded from Bombay (Abdulali 1981). However our record is for the Western Ghats of Maharashtra, and Bombay cannot be considered as part of the Western Ghats. We documented the presence of the Grey-headed Fish Eagle from inland at Chandoli Reservoir, which is located in the Western Ghats. The birds were recorded at 600 m, which adds to information on its distribution, since Naoroji (2006) mentions they are seldom found above 300–400 m in its northern range.

Regarding the records of Flame-throated Bulbul, we observed two individuals at Amba in Kolhapur district and three individuals from Talkat in Sindhudurg district. Since Santharam has reported it earlier from Talkat, our observation at Amba extends its range since Amba is 126 km north of Talkat and is located on the crest-line of the Western Ghats at 629 m, while Talkat is in the plains at 128 m.

Considering the above, we believe that both our observations add to our knowledge of these two species.

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—Prachi Mehta & Jayant Kulkarni
19 August 2013

Erroneous record of Lord Derby's Parakeet *Psittacula derbiana* from Assam, published in *Indian BIRDS* Vol. 8 No. 5

While going through the article 'Birding in Lohit Valley, Arunachal Pradesh' by Neeta Gode, I realised that the author had claimed a record of Lord Derby's Parakeet from Lekhapani, Assam, based on a picture published with the article. The picture undoubtedly

is of a Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri*. Lord Derby's Parakeet occurs usually above 2500 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), whereas Lekhapani is located in lowland Assam at c. 150 m. Red-breasted Parakeet is a lowland species occurring below 1500 m (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Lord Derby's Parakeet is a larger version of Red-breasted Parakeet with which it can be confused except for the fact that their altitudinal range does not overlap. Adult Red-breasted Parakeet has a pink breast, as hinted in the picture of the bird from Lekhapani, whereas Lord Derby's Parakeet shows a purple breast as seen in the picture of this species by Arun P. Singh, published in the same issue on page 133. Moreover, Red-breasted Parakeet has a fairly short tail with short central tail projection as seen in the picture by the author (notice very long tail in Arun P. Singh's picture).

The claim of occurrence of Lord Derby's Parakeet in Assam is erroneous and must be withdrawn.

— Manoj Sharma
Village Shankarpur, Ramnagar, District Nainital 244715,
Uttarakhand, India. E-mail: treesswift@gmail.com

Tom Roberts

I have had the privilege of knowing Tom Roberts since 1948 when he returned to Pakistan after completing his studies at the University of Iowa. He joined his father who represented British Cotton Growers Association in Pakistan based in Khanewal having set up the Roberts Cotton Association to gin cotton and market it in Pakistan and abroad.

Tom Roberts' real interest was in wildlife, specifically in ornithology. He was a gifted artist, almost self-taught. He mentored and encouraged me to take interest in the setting up of the Pakistan Wildlife Appeal to be the local chapter of the World Wildlife Appeal headquartered in Switzerland founded by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands and among others by Sir Peter Scott. These two organizations are today WWF-International in Switzerland and WWF-Pakistan.

It have had the honour to be Tom's friend for sixty-five years. He was a keen naturalist and an authority on Pakistani birds and mammals. His books, 'Birds of Pakistan', Vol. 1 and 2 and 'Mammals of Pakistan', Vol. 1 and 2 are testimony to his knowledge about various species of animals and birds of Pakistan. In these voluminous books he has done all the sketching of animals and birds himself.

He was a keen bird watcher. When he lived in Karachi, there was a group of people interested in birds. In one day from dawn to dusk, they identified over 350 species of birds! Such was the sense of enquiry in Tom.

I have lost a friend, and the world is poorer without a great naturalist and a unique human being.

— Babar Ali, Pakistan
E-mail: C/o. Sahil Zaheer, sahil.zaheer@packages.com.pk

In memoriam
Thomas Jones Roberts
1924 — 2013