

Record of Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* breeding in Dehradun, India

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The family Rallidae, represented by 19 spp. in India—including rails, crakes, gallinule, coot and finfoot—are small to medium-sized birds mainly inhabiting reedy swamps, mangroves and paddy fields. A few of these species, specifically the rails and crakes, are notorious for their skulking habits and are rarely flushed, and are thus comparatively little known. One such species, the Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* was observed in the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) campus located in Dehradun. This species was also observed to breed inside the campus and here we report on these observations. The record of this species is also of some significance considering its patchy distribution range within India, and the fact that it was previously recorded only from eastern parts of the state of Uttaranchal (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005).

On 25th July 2007, around 1030 hrs, we saw a waterhen-like bird wading in a small streamlet flowing through the campus. On noticing us the bird quickly moved into the vegetation, only to return a little later. And, this time it, though conscious of our presence, continued to wade along the stream. The red colouration of the beak, the characteristic reddish brown colour of the head, the slaty-grey breast feathers, and the fine white barring on the bird identified it as a Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* (Fig. 1). The rail moved over to a small rock along the watercourse and perching on it, started to preen.

WII campus is interspersed with a few perennial water sources and a small man-made lake, and along these watercourses dense stands of *Sapium sebiferum* grow and along some parts reeds of *Typha elephantina* occur, while the vegetation within the campus is marked by a luxuriant growth of sal *Shorea robusta* with a dense under-storey dominated by *Lantana camara* and *Jasminum multiflorum* bushes.

The rail was again seen at the same location on 1st August 2007 and to our great surprise it was with eight precocious chicks! The chicks were in down, black in colour, and appeared to have possibly hatched only few days ago. Over the next couple of days, the rail, with its chicks, was regularly sighted at the same location, during the late morning hours; the adult on the rock preening, while the chicks wading in the stream. Then, all of a sudden the rail family was not seen for several days, and we suspected the birds might have moved off to a different part of the stream. On 15th August 2007, a single rail chick, now larger, about the size of a quail *Coturnix* sp., was seen at the same location where the adult rail was first spotted. Interestingly, this chick appeared to be alone and already independent. Its beak was longer and reddish in colour, and the overall plumage was brown with dark brown streaks on the back as reported for young birds by Ali & Ripley (2001). The belly and wing had faint white barring, and the throat was buff white (Fig. 2).



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Fig. 1. Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus* in Dehradun, India.

The fate of the other chicks was not known and even along other parts of the stream there were no signs of the birds including the adult. Considering their skulking habits it is possible that we missed spotting the birds, however, we wondered whether the other chicks had been predated. The lone chick was repeatedly sighted for a few more days—it was last seen was on 22nd August 2007. Going by the severity of winter in Dehradun and the fact that many resident rail birds migrate locally from the campus, we suspected the rail had departed too. In the summer of 2008, we awaited the arrival of the Slaty-breasted Rail, hoping that it would breed again on the campus. And to our joy, a single adult Slaty-breasted Rail was seen at the same location along the stream on 28th June 2008 at 1245 hrs. Alas this was the only sighting in 2008. Ali & Ripley (2001) report that this species is resident, but moves about locally under the stress of drought or flood. Thus, this breeding record of the Slaty-breasted Rail in the WII campus may have been a result of such movements.

Within the WII campus seven other species of Rallids have been recorded previously, namely, Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*, Baillon's Porzana *pusilla*, Brown *P. akool* and Ruddy-breasted Crakes *P. fuscata*, White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, and Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*. White-breasted Waterhen and Common Moorhen have been observed to regularly breed within the campus while the other species are only occasionally seen.

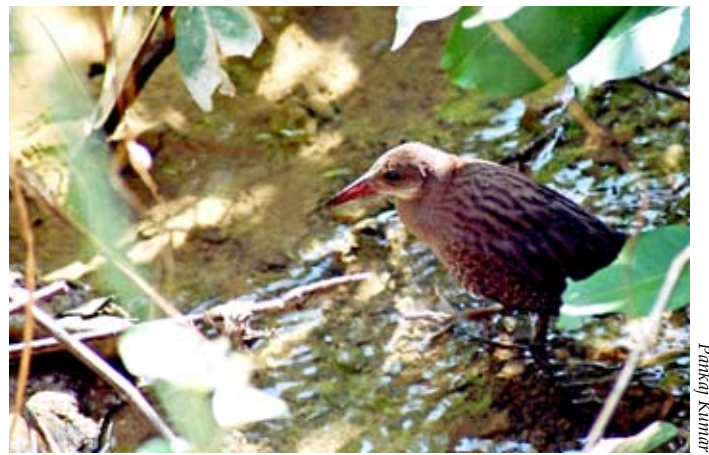


Fig. 2. Juvenile Slaty-breasted Rail *Rallus striatus*.

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Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* in the diet of the African Catfish *Clarias gariepinus* in Keoladeo Ghana National Park, India

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The Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* is a widespread and common wetland bird species globally, also occurring commonly in India. There are very few observations of predation on this species (Bannor & Kiviat 2002). On 8th March 2009 we fished out a large African catfish *Clarias gariepinus* at Keoladeo Ghana National Park (KGNP) as part of a reconnaissance study on the diet of this invasive fish species. We retrieved a freshly eaten carcass of an adult Common Moorhen from the stomach of the fish. The fish measured 72 cm from snout to tail tip with a gape of 14.5 cm.

Fish predation on birds in freshwater habitats is not uncommon, though usually chicks are taken (Lagler 1956). Predation of adult waterbirds is commoner in marine habitats, which have larger fish (Glegg 1945, 1947; Straneck *et al.* 1983; Carlson *et al.* 2002). Common Moorhen mortality records by fish are very rare and are from outside India. Chicks have been recovered from stomachs of largemouth bass *Micropterus salmoides* (Bell & Cordes 1977), and

one adult each has been recovered from the stomach of pike *Esox lucius* (Glegg 1947) and eel *Anguilla anguilla* (Glegg 1945).

The African catfish is a very widespread invasive fish species and is suspected to be a major threat to native fish fauna (Casal 2006; de Silva *et al.* 2009). It is an omnivore / predator that feeds mostly on fish (de Graaf & Janssen 1996), and birds have not been recorded in its diet before. The fish was first seen in KGNP in 2004 (BAK *pers. obs.*). It is thought to have been distributed to villagers in surrounding villages for pisciculture and is believed to have entered the park by accident. It is a hardy species that can survive dry seasons due to the presence of its accessory air breathing organs (de Graaf & Janssen 1996). It is possible that local fish species are being out-competed by this fast growing and rapidly reproducing invasive. Owing to the wide head of the African catfish, the bigger individuals are not eaten by waterbirds in the park; the Great White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus* has been observed to choke on this species (BAK *pers. obs.*). This invasive