

An Ornithological Pilgrimage to Lake Manasarowar and Mount Kailas

Reprinted with permission from *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* Vol.46, pp.286-308, 1946

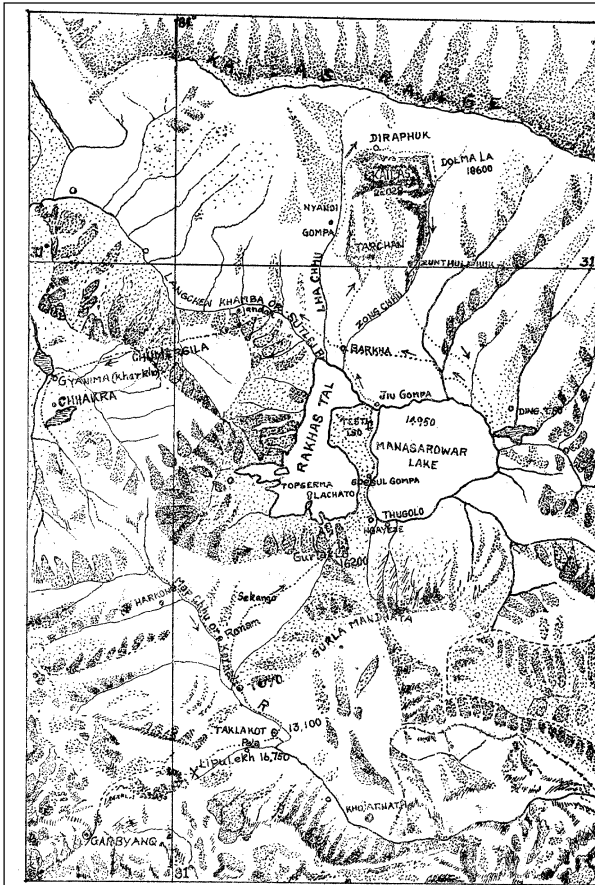
Sálim Ali

The hallowed region of the freshwater lakes of Manasarowar and Rakhas Tal, and of Mount Kailas in Western Tibet is virtually forbidden ground to Europeans. It is perhaps for this reason more than any other that practically nothing has so far been recorded about its birds. The time-honoured legend about 'hansa' ('Swans' according to pilgrims' guide books) living on Manasarowar somehow persists, and in the popular mind these birds have become inseparable from the sacred lake. But reliable published information concerning the general ornithology of this region is lacking, although some excellent papers have appeared within the last 20 years or so on Ladakh as well as on Eastern Tibet by Osmaston, Meinertzhagen, Ludlow and others.

Mr Frank Ludlow, who probably knows more about Tibetan birds than any other ornithologist living, made a small collection in Western Tibet in September-October 1932. The late Hugh Whistler pronounced it to consist of typical Tibetan Plateau forms, not differing from those occurring in Ladakh on the one hand or in the neighbourhood of Lhasa on the other. Ludlow never published any report of this trip, but has now been good enough to let me see his MS notes and to permit me to incorporate them in the present account. I consider it fortunate to be able to do so for 2 reasons: firstly because up to a point his itinerary coincided with my own, and secondly because his notes cover a period which is almost exactly complementary. Ludlow's trek was much more extended than mine, but I have here utilised only such of his notes as relate specially to the region visited by me. While there is nothing novel or unexpected in the list that follows, it seems desirable to put this precise data on record for the benefit of future visitors.

What primarily attracted me to Manasarowar was the opportunity to study the natural conditions under which birds live on the Roof of the World, to ascertain at





(After Heim & Ganssev)

The Kailas-Manasarowar Region of Western Tibet

first hand what species breed in that area, and to determine if possible some of the ecological factors that foster their doing so. Although not interested in birds purely from what may be called the 'sub-specific' point of view, I nevertheless feel it a great pity that practically no collecting could be done in an area that is so seldom visited by an ornithologist. I was advised by those who administered our External Affairs not to carry a gun to shoot birds with. Presumably it offends the religious scruples of the Tibetans to see birds killed by other people. None of these scruples were detected in the case of animals killed by themselves, and in a manner that would make shooting seem a kindness.

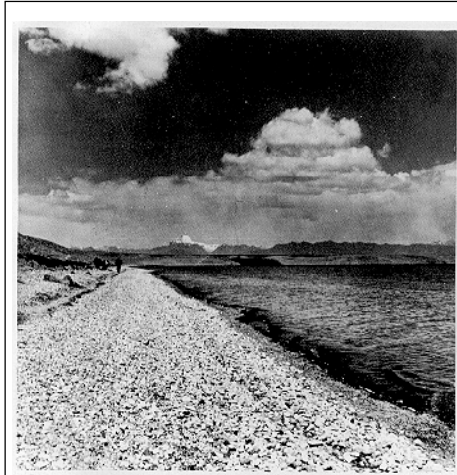
However, that is another story. But in the absence of skins for verification, some of my identifications may have to be taken with reserve, particularly in cases where they are at variance with Ludlow's.

I must confess that I have seldom felt sorrier for being so law-abiding and following official advice. Not only was much valuable scientific material lost without a gun; not only would an occasional roast goose have provided welcome change from the eternal dal and rice; but also the couple of ugly encounters with local bandits that



infest the Manasarowar environs could have been faced with far greater self-composure and dignity! As it was, either of these might well have ended in disaster had the bandits suspected the astonishing truth (for those parts) that the party was completely unarmed.

To enable me to be there in time for the nesting, a start had to be made as early in the season as the snow would permit. The proper does not about August. My Almora on 14 May the same place on Tibetan frontier, route by the Lipu ft., it is a matter of — nearly 160 miles. first 14 marches back. The regular easterly direction passes through Himalayan scenery from various places Nanda Devi, Panch Chuli peaks.



Western shore of Mansarowar with Mount Kailas in the background (showing Shore or Beach zone).

on the Lipu Pass pilgrim season commence until trek began at 1945 and ended at 22 July. Up to the crossed on this Lekh Pass at 16,750 about 16 marches—Baggage over the travelled cooly trace takes a north-from Almora and some picturesque with superb views along the route of Nanda Kot and the For more than half

its latter length it follows the right bank of the torrential Kali River which forms the boundary between the Kumaon district of Almora and the kingdom of Nepal. At Lipu Lekh the Kali is run to its source. The trek, commencing at about 5,200 ft. altitude (Almora) goes through an unending series of steep ups and downs. The lowest point ever touched in the course of the 160 odd miles is 2,200 ft. where the path crosses the Gauri Ganga River. Thus it furnishes a cross-section through an altitudinal range of some 14,000 ft. — from the warm subtropical jungles of the Himalayan foothills through various climatic and vegetational zones, up to above the limit of tree growth. The accompanying changes in the bird life as one crosses from one altitudinal zone or stratum to another are often so clear-cut that using them as



indicators one soon learns to hazard a fair guess of the approximate elevation even without the help of the aneroid. It is this constant change of levels and the meeting and partings with new or familiar birds that to my mind makes trekking in the Himalayas so particularly delightful.

On 8 June the Lipu Lekh Pass was still under fresh and fairly deep snow. It had to be crossed in the unearthly hours of the morning while the surface was still hard and passable for the baggage ponies which had replaced the porters at Garbyang. After groping our way uncomfortably over boulders in pitch darkness with the dubious help of 2 miserable electric torches, the summit of the pass was reached at 6.15 hours just as the sun peeped out from over the barrier of mountains to the east. Here, among the cairns or piles of Mani stones, contributed laboriously one by one by grateful pilgrims and wayfarers (such as mark the head of every mountain pass in Tibet) was my first meeting of the trip with the Robin Accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*). The birds — two or three — were delightfully tame; they hopped unconcernedly on the snow within 4 feet of our cavalcade, picking up food. This was also my first introduction to the amazing confidence and complete lack of fear that was henceforth to be experienced from almost every species of bird in Tibet. Such behaviour came strangest of all from the Bar-headed Geese and Brahminy Duck which, as every shikari knows, are amongst the wariest and most wide-awake of our waterfowl in their winter quarters in India.

Immediately across the pass the character of the country, now Tibet, changed abruptly. Trees of course are non-existent here, but other vegetation was also exceedingly scanty wherever the dry stony slopes were free from snow. Only small

It is this constant change of levels and the meeting and partings with new or familiar birds that to my mind makes trekking in the Himalayas so particularly delightful.

patches of low shrubs of Doma or Tibetan Furze (*Caragana spinosa*) clung here and there to the mountain sides, otherwise completely bare and scree covered. The route from Lipu to Taklakot runs all down the right bank of the river — the opposite number of the Kali, as it were — which rises on the Tibet side of the pass, the latter being the watershed. This river descends in a gently winding course for about 4,000 ft. in the 12 odd miles to Taklakot where it joins the Mapcha or Karnali. The latter, after flowing a great part of its





Tibetan Raven



Hume's Ground Chough at nest

length through Nepal territory in a N-S direction joins the Gogra in the Kheri District of the U.P. just south of the Nepal boundary.

Taklakot or Purang (c. 13,000 ft.), the first village of any size to be encountered, is a large and important *mandi* during the summer months. Traders from all parts of Tibet as well as from British India foregather here between June and November to barter wool, furs, borax and other indigenous produce with cloth and other articles of civilisation which appear to have a growing demand. Among these I note as part of the standard stock-in-trade of Indian shops: cheap electric torches, new and second-hand army boots and plimssoles, packets of tea from Lhasa and Berenag, sugar (misri), pots of highly scented vaseline pomade, safety pins and a miscellaneous assortment of tawdry nick-nacks requiring a high degree of imagination on the part of the shopkeepers.

One of the first indications that one had left Indian soil and was now in a different ornithological region is provided by the pigeons, which here suddenly change over to the Turkestan Rock Pigeon (*Columba rupestris*). This species is easily distinguished from our familiar Blue Rock by its whitish underparts and a broad white bar across its tail. Flocks of these birds were to be seen gleaning in the fields of young barley and gram surrounding the village. A few often visited our camp to pick up what grain they could round the kitchen tent. They were as tame and trusting as their pampered relations in the midst of Bhuleshwar (Bombay) for example, and other centres of Hindu benevolence.

The Tibetan Raven (*Corvus corax tibetanus*) takes the place of Jungle and House Crows as the village scavenger, though it is seen in smaller numbers. Skylarks — apparently



Alauda gulgula lhamarum— were soaring and singing plentifully above the cultivation, while Red-billed Choughs (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) grubbed away merrily on the outskirts. The House-Sparrow — presumably *P.d. bactrianus* — was here in some numbers, but not as abundant as I was to find it on the return visit a month later. At Taklakot the 6 baggage ponies were exchanged for 4 yaks. And here a short digression may be permissible. The yak is an extraordinary beast. From in front it looks like an overgrown bear; from behind like a very shaggy hill pony. It possesses boundless energy, and seems impossible to tire out except when the weather is hot. It is highly sensitive to and impatient of the heat which seems to be the only element that will ever lower its spirits. At the end of a long fatiguing all-day march, carrying on their backs 2 maunds (160lbs.) of often the most and uncomfortable load, and with just a few mouthfuls of scanty grass snatched while we halted for the mid-day meal, our yaks would frisk and romp obviously feeling 'as fresh as a daisy'. It was disconcerting when ebullience of spirits prompted one to buck and throw your baggage — boxes containing delicate and precious meteorological instruments that, moreover, didn't belong to you! A bridge is anathema to the yak. It is not every animal that will walk over it. Neither is it every day that even the same yak will consent to walk over one. There may be some justification for its preferring to leap into an icy cold torrent and swim across rather than use the highly unconvincing rickety wooden structure swaying perilously above it. One is frequently tempted to do so oneself. But the soaking is not always beneficial for your baggage, particularly when this happens to be your bedding or warm clothes. Luckily bridges are few in Tibet. The yak has an unpredictable temperament, and you never know beforehand how one is going to react to any given set of circumstances.

The mountains here are chiefly composed of conglomerates — large quantities of rounded water-worn shingle cemented together with clay through age and pressure. Large detached blocks littered on the hillsides that look like enormous boulders in the distance are also composed of the same conglomerated clay and shingle, reminding one of chunks of almond rock. All the way from Taklakot to Manasarowar the country is flat stony desert, the ground surface being chiefly covered with smooth water-worn stones, shingle or gravel — partly disintegrated from the

The water surface of Manasarowar ... ranges to every imaginable shade of green and blue - and from the deepest jade and the purest emerald to intense ultramarine blue and purplish-black.



mountains. Broadly speaking it is a titanic undulating steppe mostly between 14 and 15 thousand feet above sea level, extending miles in every direction and fringed on the near or distant horizon by snowy ranges and peaks. The enormous flat or gently sloping areas from the foot of the Gurla Mandhata Range to northward bear evidences of becoming vast snow-fields in winter. The stones, gravel and shingle on them are flattened down as by a steam roller. A curiously similar formation was noticed by me on the hills around Chaduva in Kutch (1943) but the stones there were all flat like paving slabs. What can that be due to?

From time to time flat-sided trough-like valleys are encountered as of glacial origin running down from the flanking hills. Through these meander rivulets from the melting snows higher up. About the banks of these rivulets, where the snow has melted, there is usually some scant herbage — a narrow strip of it on either side. This is the only green to break the drab and endless monotony of the stony landscape. The few birds that there are, concentrate in such places. Occasional low dense bushes of Doma or Tibetan Furze on the plateau, either isolated or scattered in patches, provide the only relief to the eye. They are sprawling and round-topped, like large hedgehogs, streamlined on their periphery near the ground. Dotted about on a gentle slope in the distance, they often look like a flock of grazing sheep.

A very characteristic facies of this region is that which occurs in the flat open valleys sloping so imperceptibly as to impede drainage and cause water-logging. At the season of my visit (first half of June) these showed traces of having been enormous snow-fields till recently, and extensive patches of snow were still lying about here and there. Where the snow has melted is often exposed a varying extent of semifloating spongy uneven humps, up to 12 inches high, covered with what looks like close-cropped lush grass. Such areas become tundra-like bogs. In portions the humps though green and refreshing are comparatively dry. In other parts the ground is completely soggy and water-logged, and they are in effect an archipelago of miniature island or aits.

Almost everywhere around such tundra bogs the Lesser Pamirs Sand-Plover (*Charadrius mongolus atrifrons*) — familiar to us in winter on the western seaboard in flocks and now in his handsome summer dress — was sure to be met with.



Surrounding these bogs there is usually a luxuriant growth of furze 'hedge-hogs' which afford some protection from the violent winds and are much patronised for nesting in by Robin Accentors, Rubythroats and Tickell's Willow-Warblers.

Everywhere on the stony gravelly plateau, even in the barest and most featureless spots, the Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris elwesii*) was breeding in great abundance. It has remained a puzzle to me why this bird chose the bleakest spots for its nest and what considerations decided the selection of a site. It seemed completely unperturbed by the wind and its nests were usually in the most exposed places. Occasionally they were near a tiny stone, it is true, but I am inclined to think that, if anything, this served more as a landmark to the bird than as an effective wind-break.

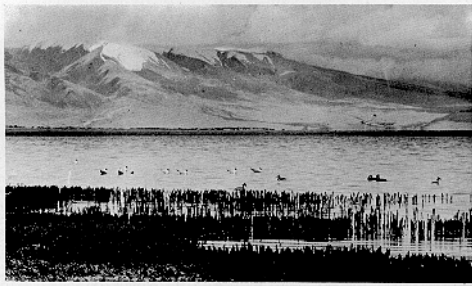
Immediately on crossing the summit of Gurla Pass (16,500 ft.) — wide and flat enough I imagine, for 200 Churchill tanks abreast — the first view is obtained, glorious and breath-taking, of the twin lakes of Manasarowar and Rakhas Tal with the ice-covered dome of Mt. Kailas towering in the distant background to the north. The lakes are separated by a ridge of low hills forming an isthmus, 3 or 4 miles at its widest. Along this lies the route to Barkha Plain and the holy mountain.

My first camp on Manasarowar was pitched at Ngayeze (c. 15,200 ft.) on the S-W shore of the lake. The water surface of Manasarowar is 14,950 ft. above sea level. It is 54 miles in circumference and surrounded on all sides by mountains, many of them well over 20,000 ft. high with snow-covered tops. The greatest depth sounded by Sven Hedin in 1907 was 269 ft. The colours on the lake, changing not only with time of day but with every fleeting mood of the sky are a thing undecipherable, and not likely ever to be forgotten. From almost snow-white, may be, at one end, it ranges to every imaginable shade of green and blue — and from the deepest jade and the purest emerald to intense ultramarine blue and purplish-black.

A scrutiny of the terrain on the southern and south-western shores of lake reveals an interesting range of successions. There are no reedbeds at all about the margins of Manasarowar or Rakhas Tal, or indeed of any of the other lakes visited.

At the water's edge is a flat Shore or Beach zone of sand and shingle; higher up this





Ding Tso breeding place of Brownheaded Gulls, Tibetan Terns, Redshanks, Blacknecked Crane, Eared Grebes, etc.



A typical 'tundra' bog – Gyanima Tso breeding ground of Barheaded Geese, Large Calandra Larks, etc.

gives place to a wider zone (in places 2 to 300 yards wide) of 'tundra' bog as described — spongy water-girt humps interspersed with small pools. Above the tundra zone follows another wide belt, of dense furze hedgehogs formed by a windblown accumulation of debris caught up in the bushes resulting in raised mounds at their core. These sprawling hedge-hogs are 18 to 24 inches high and sometimes cover the ground so thickly as to hinder one's progress. Beyond the furze zone the flat bare ground is covered with loose stones and shingle, flattened down to evenness by the weight of the overlying winter snow. It stretches upward in a gentle sweep for 1 to 1½ miles, to the base of the Gurla Mandhata Range. The Shore and 'Tundra' zones, particularly where they meet, are riddled into a sieve with holes and galleries of voles and mouse-hares. As can be imagined, these four zones are not clear cut or sharply demarcated along their boundaries and frequently dovetail into their neighbours, but they are distinct enough to be perceived without difficulty. With the exception perhaps of the Beach zone — a speciality of Manasarowar and 'Rakhas Tal — the same order of succession with minor local variations is met with also on the smaller lakes: Ding Tso, Tseti Tso, Gyanima Tso, and others.

Adam's Mountain Finch (*Montifringilla nivalis adamsi*) as well as its two cousins *M. blandordi* and *M. ruficollis*

Of the waterfowl Bar-headed Geese, Brahminy Duck and Goosander were the most prominent representatives, the first two in considerable numbers.



were everywhere taking full advantage of the rat holes as nest sites, and quite a few were observed carrying food into them. The tundra around the lakes seemed to be breeding ground par excellence of the Large Calandra Lark (*Calandra maxima*). Hundreds of these birds were busy courting, chasing one another, singing and nest-building round Manasarowar, Tseti Tso, Ding Tso and Gyanima Tso, Short-toed Larks (*Calandrella Acutirostris*) were also present in the tundra zone at Manasarowar in large numbers. This was somewhat puzzling at first, but it was soon discovered that they visited the bog merely for collecting insects for their young, and flew off with beakfuls long distances to the bare stony country above the furze belt where they were nesting.

The principal inhabitant of the Furze zone were the Ruby-throat (*Calliope*), Robin Accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*) and Tickell's Willow-Warbler (*Phylloscopus affinis*). Higher up, on the stony and gravelly plain, Horned Larks and Short-toed Larks were nesting abundantly, and the jolly little Hume's Ground Chough frequently seen.

At the time of my visit to Manasarowar and Rakhas Tal the snow had not been gone long, and it was as yet too early in the season for the lush grass which is said to spring up luxuriantly on the moist areas later — mid-July or August. Great herds of goats, sheep and yaks are then brought here for pasture from distant parts.

Curiously enough, except for an occasional sand-plover or two, no waders at all were to be seen at the water's edge in the Shore or Beach zone of Manasarowar. Their place appeared to be filled by Brandt's Mountain Finches (*Fringillauda brandti haematopyga*). Hundreds of these birds ran about the waterline looking very like stints, busily picking seeds washed up by the ripples. Sometimes the birds were in ones and twos, but mostly in flocks of 50 or more. They had evidently not commenced to breed as yet.

Of the waterfowl Bar-headed Geese, Brahminy Duck and Goosander were the most prominent representatives, the first two in considerable numbers. The geese, it seemed fairly certain were not breeding in the immediate neighbourhood. Their favourite nesting ground is on two boggy islands in the Rakhas Tal but without a boat it was not possible to explore these. A mixed flock of over 50 duck was observed on





Barkha Plain. Dry bogland and gravel facies.



Barkha Plain. Sandy Doma facies

the water as they flew over, but it was difficult to tell with certainty what they were besides the few Gadwal and Pintail which were unmistakable. They were evidently not meaning to breed here either. Crested Grebes were abundant and number of their floating nests dotted the water some distance from the shore, particularly on a small lagoon by the side of the main lake. Brown-headed Gulls, Tibetan Terns and a couple of Pallas's Fishing Eagles practically complete the list of birds seen about the southern end of Manasarowar Lake.

The Barkha or Parka Plain which separates the Manasarowar and Rakhas Lakes from the Kailas Range to the north, extends for many miles in an E-W direction. It is a gigantic highland steppe or flat valley covered for the most part with gravel and scanty scraggy grass at present. It is said to afford rich pasture later in the season, especially along the banks of the many streams that leisurely meander across it on their way from the Kailas Range to Rakhas Tal. Along the northern edge of the Barkha Plain the ground slopes gently southwards in a gigantic sweep from the base of the Kailas Range. This sloping zone, several miles in width, is covered more or less densely with bushes of Dome or Tibetan Furze. Its surface consists of soft loose sand in places, and in others of coarse river sand with stones and shingle intermixed. It is cut up here and there by deep or shallow ravines of streams coming down from the Kailas Range. The sandy Doma-facies is strongly reminiscent of bits of the Indian Desert in Sind or Kutch, only the *Capparis* of the latter being here replaced by furze. The windblown sand is arrested in the same way by the furze bushes and forms compact mounds, but seldom higher than 12 or 18 inches. This facies,





Mouse Hare

particularly in the environs of Rakhas Tal, is the favoured habitat of the Kyang (*Equus*) which flourishes in large herds of up to 100 or more. The Barkha Plain can be differentiated into several other facies besides: Loose-sand covered with sparse grass; coarse, roughly waterworn gravel and stone; and dry bogland. The last consists of uneven dips and mounds of crumbly earth reminding one of old worn-down flamingo nests.

Marching over the plain, one is constantly crossing from one into another of these facies. Wherever near a stream or its flat overflow, i.e. ground actually moist or till recently water-logged, it is honeycombed by mouse hares to such an extent that one of the baggage yaks suddenly sank down to its belly. *Montifringilla blanfordi*, *M. ruficollis* and *M. nivalis* are invariably present in such facies to take advantage of the potential nest-sites. The birds and rodents evidently live together amicably. I observed a finch go down a burrow with food for young, followed soon after by a mouse-hare. Young finches when fledged, but while as yet unable to fly, come out of the tunnels and sit about and hop among the mounds where the parents feed them. On alarm they bolt down the nearest rat-hole and are evidently not molested by the occupant within.

In the flats formed by what may be called the deltas of the streams before they discharge into the Manasarowar and Rakhas Lakes, the Doma gives place to extensive patches of a greyish-green bush about 12 inches high,



Kyang or the Tibetan Ass on the Tibetan plateau.





Redstart



Horned Lark female on nest

know in Tibetan as *Tarwa* and in Kumaon as *Chookoo*. These bushes apparently die down in winter and were just beginning to come up again (in June) on the melting of the snows.

The official pilgrimage of Mount Kailas begins at Tarchan or Darchan (alt. 15,500 ft), a ramshackle village of a few hovels of piled up loose stones, with a Gompa or monastery and attendant filth as its centre-piece. It also boasts of a small *mandi* open in summer but now lying derelict. The circuit of the holy mountain is 28 miles round and involves the crossing of a pass (Dolma La) 18,600 ft. high. Furze growth peters out at about 16,000 ft. and above this elevation perennial vegetation is practically non-existent. Bird-life along the entire circuit — in fact above 15,000 ft. altitude — was poor, but this may partly be due to the fact that I was much too early in the season. Places that had been recommended to us as rich alpine pastures and flower meadows were as yet little more than bleak and desolate snowfields dotted with recently melted patches here and there where the first hesitant spring herbage was beginning to peep out.

Except for Redstarts which were particularly abundant and nesting among the scree fans near Diraphuk or Diripu, a few pigeons and ravens about the Gompa there, a Robin Accentor with nest and eggs on the edge of a partly frozen stream, several Red-billed Choughs, and a couple of Himalayan Griffons and Lammergeiers beating majestically over the hillside behind the

The official pilgrimage of Mount Kailas begins at Tarchan or Darchan (alt. 15,500 ft), a ramshackle village of a few hovels of piled up loose stones, with a Gompa or monastery and attendant filth as its centre-piece.



monastery, practically no birds were seen. A couple of pigeons were encountered on the very summit of Dolma La, attracted there by the grain sprinkled according to custom by pious jatris in thanksgiving for the culmination of the arduous climb. The Lha Chhu and other part-frozen streams on the holy circuit looked ideal for White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts, but these familiar Himalayan species were completely absent. On the Tibet side of Lipu Lekh Pass I also failed to come across the Whistling Thrush, so common along the Kali River on the Himalayan side, almost right up to its source.

Horned Larks nest on the Barkha Plain in great profusion, both in completely barren and desolate spots as well as where there is a scanty growth of stunted furze. Short-toed Larks are more partial to the latter facies. Ground Choughs, Tickell's Willow-Warblers and Redstarts evidently prefer the side valleys where earth banks for nest-holes are readily available, and where there is more protection from the ferocity of the regular diurnal winds.

The Ding Tso lake proved a particularly fruitful place for birds. From the cosy comfort of the sleeping bag, and without raising my head from the pillow, could be watched through the open fly of the tent almost any time of day, numbers of geese, cranes and Brahminies as they sauntered about and grazed complacently on the grassy margins of the lake and in the surrounding marsh, within easy shot-gun range. My diary records: 'Delightful, but oh for a .22 and roast goose on the menu!' Along its eastern and northern shores is an extensive tundra belt 3 or 4 miles long and in places fully $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile broad. Many of the uneven spongy humps here are actually floating, and separated from each other by a good long jump over deepish water. One had to be nippy and constantly on guard lest the hump underfoot should disappear below the surface before one had time to jump across to the next. It was an uncomfortable and flustering feeling to find oneself suddenly down to the waist in the ice-cold water and sinking steadily. It was necessary to plan out several jumps in advance, and decide quickly. And the possibility of quick sands here and there — against which I had been warned — added to the excitement of the game. However it was fascinating work, and the exploration of this marshy belt proved well worthwhile. I found breeding here not only Bar-headed Geese and Black-necked Cranes, but also Brown-headed Gulls, Tibetan Terns, Redshanks, Crested Grebes and Large Calandra Larks.

All photographs in this article are by the Author

