

The Breeding of the Fire-tailed Sunbird in Rolwaling.

In late May 1980 I crossed the Tashi Lapcha from the direction of Rolwaling. Just below the treeline in the Rolwaling valley a male Fire-tailed Sunbird flew in front of me to visit his nest.

The nest had a roof and was suspended from twigs in a rather open straggly bush. It was at eye level and about six feet from the path, but was so well camouflaged to look like a tangle of dead vegetation that I would never have noticed it if it hadn't been for the give-away behaviour of the male.

It was possible to look inside it without causing undue disturbance. It contained two naked chicks, who, as far as I remember, were fairly large - just about to sprout pin feathers. I was sure I hadn't frightened the hen away - she must have been used to sitting tight while people passed her on the path and I hadn't taken my eyes off the nest since I drew level with it - so I was surprised that they weren't being brooded.

I've always been puzzled by the behaviour of the male. All the other really brilliant birds that I know of nest in holes where the young are relatively inaccessible to predators, or else the male takes no part in feeding them. The survival of the young seemed to depend entirely on camouflage, and to need the help of the male, so I couldn't understand why he had evolved to be so spectacular, instead of showing an average amount of sexual dimorphism. However I saw Long-tailed Minivets behaving in a similar fashion in Langtang, although their nest was near the top of a tall tree.

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At 19,000 feet, on the summit of the Tashi Lapcha, a falcon flew overhead who looked like a peregrine, but was very pale, almost white. I believe there is a pale race, Falco peregrinus babylonicus that breeds in Central Asia and winters in India, so presumably crossed the Himalayas. However it was rather late in the year for a bird to be on spring migration and I believe this subspecies is very rare so I've always looked on this bird as a mystery.

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Ms R.J.Cooper, (1980)  
c/o Flat 52,  
Rosebery Court,  
Water Lane,  
Leighton Buzzard.  
Beds. LU7 7DL.