



Habitat:

Scrub thorn forests with sparse deciduous vegetation; stone covered grassy, semiarid country with ravines, on plains and hills.

Habit:

Secretive. Diurnal. Seen single or in pairs in thickets. Mostly terrestrial; runs swiftly. Flight clumsy; hops on branches to ascend a tree where it preens and roosts.

Distribution:

Over a large range including India, W. Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangla Desh and Sri Lanka; up to 1000 m.

Status:

Resident; Rare.



Arboreal habit



Terrestrial habit. Prefers to run than fly

Food:



Grasshopper



Lizard



Grasshopper



Praying mantis



Moth

Grasshoppers, locusts, butterflies and moths, worms, centipedes, millipedes, spiders, lizards, small snakes, etc. Food is taken from the ground. Malkoha is a territorial bird and usually finds food close to the nest.



Rare Glimpse of Natural Predation:



A photo frame captured on an automatic camera shows a mongoose predating on a nestling of the Sirkeer Malkoha. The mongoose devoured the helpless nestling and walked away in search of new prey

Visitors to the Nest of Sirkeer Malkoha:



Rufous Treepie visiting the empty nest



A Five-striped Palm Squirrel near the nest

The secret life of the Malkoha:



Aggressive behaviour against intruders



The Malkoha with cryptic plumage is often overlooked



Perching on the nest with tail elevated



Incubating the eggs



Preening is a favourite activity

Threats:

Tree felling for firewood and habitat modification are major threats. We have recorded natural predation of eggs and chicks by treepie, coucal, crow and mongoose, as corroborated by camera trap photographs.



Perching on a branch in the morning

Key Features:

- Sexes alike.
- Adult plumage spinous: earthy brown to rufous.
- Head and breast feathers faintly streaked.
- Wings rounded.
- Bill bright cherry red, yellow tipped, stout, curved. Upper mandible festooned.
- Tail long, broad, graduated. Broad black and white bands.
- Iris - brown. Coarse bristles surround the eyes except behind.
- Legs - scaled, slaty; claws horny brown.
- Young: Body feathers edged with pale rufous; of head, chin, breast streaked with black. Beak slaty, becomes red after six months.



Ruffled feathers and the cherry-red yellow-tipped beak



The brown iris and slaty beak of the juvenile are visible

Juvenile:- Details of the wings, tail, beak, mouth and leg:



Strengthening relations by fecal sac exchange:



The fecal sac of chicks in the first week contains undigested food remains and is rich in proteins. In this amazing sequence of photographs the Malkoha parents do not waste the fecal sacs and are seen exchanging this unique source of food!

Amazing Facts:

Sirkeer Malkoha is a non-parasitic cuckoo. The nest is very difficult to detect and the bird becomes particularly secretive during breeding. This Malkoha is an amazingly swift runner in the undergrowth.

Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii* (Lesson, 1830).

Type locality: No locality=Cawnpore; Sasan, Junagad, Saurashtra. TSN: 705310 (Avibase).

Mungshya (Marathi); Jungli Tota (Hindi); Adavi Chiluka, Potu Chiluka (Telugu); Kalli Kuyil (Malayalam); Pathang atti-kukkula (Simhala).

- **Size:** 42 - 44 cm.
- **Weight:** 250 – 280 g.
- **Wing:** Male/Female 147-162 mm. Tail 214-230 mm.
- **Tarsus:** 38-40 mm. **Bill:** 30-34 mm.
- **Breeding season:** March – October.
- **Eggs:** Oval; Chalky white, tinged with brown, no markings.
- **Egg Size:** 33.9 x 26.1 mm (Baker).
- **Incubation:** 18 -19 d. Sexes alike.
- **Nuptial displays:** Both sexes - Tail cocking, fanning and fluffing; bowing.
- **Call:** Usually silent; *Kek, kek, kik, kik, krree, Krree.* Hissing sounds by nestlings.

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Sirkeer Malkoha

- **Order:** Cuculiformes • **Family:** Cuculidae
- **Status:** Resident

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(RET), Pune

Phenology:



The nest cup is a designer item!



Stick nest in a tree fork



Parent tightly incubating the eggs



Chick: Top view of the feather tracts



3 days old chick: feathers in pin



6 days old chicks



8 days old chick



11 days old chicks



16 to 18 days old chick



18 days old chick



20 days old chick



34 days old chick



37 days old chick

Nest:

The saucer shaped stick nest is built in to the fork of a Neem or *Acacia* tree, 4 to 6 m above the ground; or in the tangle of *Euphorbia* cactus; made of twigs, it is neatly lined with green leaves. Both parents incubate.

Conservation:

Protected under Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. Research and 'Rural Outreach Programs' undertaken by Ela Foundation, stressing conservation of habitats, are proving useful.



Blue-faced Malkoha inhabits scrub semi-arid habitats

Related species:

Blue-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus viridirostris* (Peninsular India and Sri Lanka). Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus* (Sri Lanka endemic, probably a vagrant to Tamil Nadu). 12 species worldwide;

Etymology:

Mal-Koha means flower-cuckoo. *Phoiniko* (Gr) - crimson, and *phaes*, eyes or face, referring to the Red-faced Malkoha; *leschenaultii* commemorates the French botanist Jean Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour (Pande, Satish 2009).

Cultural aspects:

The Sirkeer Malkoha runs on the ground with head and tail extended in a mongoose-like manner, hence the Marathi name *Mungshya*- one like a mongoose!

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