



## THE MALAYAN SERPENT EAGLE, *SPILORNIS CHEELA MALAYENSIS* (SWANN), IN THE GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND, AN ADDITION TO THE INDIAN AVIFAUNA

By

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In the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands, the insular forms of the Serpent Eagle, *Spilornis* G. R. Gray, have sometimes been described as separate species by some authors, while some other authors have considered them as conspecific. Baker (1928) recognized *S. elgini* as a distinct species, and maintained *davisini*, *minimus* and *klossi* as subspecies of *S. cheela*. Swann (1931) recognized *S. elgini*, *S. minimus* and *S. klossi* in addition to *S. cheela*, as distinct species, while treating *davisoni* as a subspecies of *S. cheela*. Peters (1931) listed them more or less along the lines of Swann, but treated *klossi* as a subspecies of *S. minimus*. Ripley (1964), and Ali and Ripley (1968), however, recognized only one species, that is *S. cheela*, and accepted *elgini*, *minimus* and *klossi* as its subspecies. They have treated *davisoni* as a synonym of *S. c. elgini*. Abdulali (1965, 1967) recognized *S. elgini* as a distinct species, but kept *minimus* and *klossi* as subspecies of *S. cheela*. Amadon (1968) recognized *S. elgini* and *S. klossi* as distinct species, but treated *davisoni* and *minimus* as subspecies of *S. cheela*. He commented : "Further study, especially in the field, may indicate that some of these races merit recognition as separate species, or alternately that some, now regarded as distinct species, should be merged with *S. cheela*" He also remarked : "Only on the Andaman Islands has there been a 'double invasion' with two species co-existing, and even they are said to be separated ecologically with one inland, the other in the mangroves"

In fact, the dark form *Spilornis elgini* (Blyth) and the light form *Spilornis cheela davisoni* Hume occur in the South Andaman Island, but they were found to be ecologically separated, the former living in the tree-forests and the latter in the coastal mangroves.

We came across another case of 'double invasion' in the Great Nicobar Island where *Spilornis klossi* Richmond and *Spilornis cheela malayensis* (Swann)\* are involved, the former living in the closed type of tropical monsoon forest, while the latter in the forest edges and forest clearings near the coast.

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\* Peters (1931) listed it as *Spilornis cheela bassus* (J. R. Forster), but this could not stand as has been pointed out by Swann (1931, 156).

While working out a bird collection from Great Nicobar Island, we came across a female specimen of the Serpent Eagle, *Spilornis* from Campbell Bay, taken on 22 April 1975 by Shri P. K. Das, measuring 352, tail 227, bill 46 and tarsus 89 mm. This specimen could not be assigned to any other form but *Spilornis cheela malayensis* (Swann) because of its size and characteristic pattern of the tail and wing-bands, as well as spotting on the underparts and wing-coverts. The underparts are rather pale, not dark and with a slight trace of vermiculation. It is, compared to its nearest kins, larger in size than *minimus* (wing 293-304), but is smaller than *davisoni* (wing 393-430). Superficially it is very much like *davisoni*, but differs from it in being much lighter both above and below, dark parts of wing quills and rectrices are more intensely black, spottings on the upper primary coverts are obsolete, but those on the underparts are larger and broader, although there are less number of spots in each feather, and by the difference of patterns of the tail and wing-bands. Its ear-coverts, chin and throat are slate-brown.

#### SUMMARY

The finding of the Malayan Serpent Eagle in the Great Nicobar Island is an addition to the avifauna of that oceanic island group as well as of the Indian subregion. Its distribution has so far been recorded from the Malayan Peninsula and Sumatra.

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