

own weight. The tree was badly rotted as indicated by the way the upper half of the trunk had broken apart on hitting the ground. No limbs or bark remained on the tree, further indicating that the tree had reached an advanced state of decay before falling.

From these brief observations, we conclude that colonies of Finch-billed Mynas are occasionally susceptible to catastrophic events such as the loss of occupied nest trees. Breeding appears to be highly synchronized and, within this colony, most hatching occurred in early May. Although the clutch-size of Finch-billed Mynas has not been previously reported, the scattered nature of the dead nestlings found at our site may indicate that only one young is produced per clutch. If this is indeed true, then this colony probably contained more than one hundred breeding pairs of mynas.

G.J.W. thanks Tulende Wodi and the other staff at Tangkoko-Batuangus Nature Reserve for their hospitality during his visit. Their familiarity with the reserve's birds and knowledge of scientific bird names were invaluable. We kindly thank D. Scott Klotzbach, Derek Holmes, Craig Robson, Paul J. Conry, Frank Rozendaal and Peter Holmes for information and advice.

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## Letter: Was the 'Chinese' White-eyed River-Martin an Oriental Pratincole?

I have read with much interest E. C. Dickinson's tentative identification of the birds in the Chinese painting reproduced as the cover of *Forktail* 2 as White-eyed River-Martins *Pseudochelidon sirintarae*.

I would like to offer an alternative identification, one that is less speculative from the zoogeographic viewpoint. I believe that this painting portrays a species well known in China, the Oriental Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum*. The character that first caught my eye was the buffy throat set off by a thin dark necklace. Other arguments in favour of the identification as *Glareola* rather than *Pseudochelidon* include the broad somewhat hooked red bill, the brown rather than black dorsal colour, the pale underparts (rather than black all over as in the River-Martin), and the forked tail, with elongation of the outer rectrices (with some white in the longest) rather than the filament-like central rectrices protruding from a 'normal'-shaped tail of *Pseudochelidon*. Arguments against the identification as pratincoles would include the lack of a pale rump (which, as Dickinson pointed out, is also an argument against the river-martin identification), the absence of chestnut wing linings (which at least one field guide says are hard to see), the greatly exaggerated fork of the tail (relatively short and shallowly formed in *G. maldivarum*, rather than elongated and deeply forked as portrayed in the King-Woodcock-Dickinson field guide) and the bill painted as wholly red rather than red merely at the base (the last two characters courtesy of Tim Inskipp, who knows the Oriental Pratincole in life, as I do not). The apparent white eye is, I think, a 'red herring.' I have seen many Chinese paintings that have this 'bug-eyed' look even for birds known to have dark irides, and the pratincole does have at least a narrow white eye-ring.

Although ornithological subjects in Chinese paintings are often rendered quite realistically, in many instances artistic licence has prevailed to the extent that the pictured birds utterly defy identification. The painting on the cover of *Forktail 2* is not an accurate rendition of *any* known species, but I believe that the weight of the argument is on the side of *Glareola* over *Pseudochelidon*.

I am pleased to say that I have corresponded with Mr. Dickinson about this point, and that he now agrees that my identification is the more probable.

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Editor's Note: The identification of the cover illustration as Oriental Pratincole was made independently by C. D. R. Heard in a letter to J. T. R. Sharrock and passed direct to E. C. Dickinson, who has urged publication of this judgement.