

Short Communication

Occurrence of the Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* on Kish Island, Northeastern Persian Gulf, Iran

FARAHNAZ AZIN*, SEYED MOHAMMAD NOSRATI & HAMID AMINI

Bureau of Wildlife & Natural History Museum, Department of the Environment (DOE), Tehran, Iran.

* Correspondence Author. Email: f_azin@yahoo.com

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The Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* (Family Pycnonotidae) has an extensive distribution with an estimated global extent of occurrence of 1,000,000–10,000,000 km². It is described as common in at least parts of its range and evaluated as Least Concern in the 2007 IUCN Red List (IUCN Red List 2007). It inhabits scrub/shrub lands, natural and planted forests, cultivated areas, and parks and gardens in urban areas. Although this non-migratory bird occurs naturally as a resident breeder in tropical areas of southern Asia from Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka to southern China (ISSG Database 2005, IUCN Red List 2007), it is a rain-follower and occasionally has appeared in numbers outside its normal distribution (Lever 2005).

The Red-vented Bulbul is about 20 cm in length with a long tail and weighs 26–45 g. It has brown or black upperparts and breast, with a white abdomen and rump, and crimson undertail coverts. The head and small crest are black. The sexes are similar in plumage but young birds are duller than adults. It builds its cup-shaped nest in a bush, and lays two to five eggs in a clutch. It feeds on fruits, flower nectar, seeds, buds and also insects and occasionally small lizards. It is a noisy and gregarious bird with a bouncing and woodpecker-like flight. Outside the breeding season, the birds form large flocks and gather together in communal roosts (ISSG Database 2005, IUCN Red List 2007).

The Red-vented Bulbul does not occur naturally in Iran, and was not listed for the country by Scott *et al.* (1975), Porter *et al.* (1996), Mansoori (2001) or Scott & Adhami (2006). However, on 7 March 2007, S.M.N. observed 10–12 Red-vented Bulbuls in the east

of Kish Island, Hormozgan Province (around Pars-Abad Boulevard & the Club of the Kish Free Zone Organization); the authors carried out a preliminary survey of the Red-vented Bulbuls here in October 2007.

Kish Island is located in the Persian Gulf approximately 18 km off the nearest mainland coast of Iran (53°53'–54°04'N, 26°29'–26°35'E). It is a flat island, with an area of 91.5 km² and highest point at about 45 m a.s.l. The weather is mild in winter and hot and humid in summer. The average temperature is 27°C and the precipitation is low, with an annual average of 150.7 mm (Kish Free Zone Organization 2008). The vegetation of the island consists of indigenous species such as *Ficus religiosa* and *Glossonema varians*, and non-native species such as *Prosopis juliflora* and *Ziziphus lotus* (Karimi 2002, Mozafarian 2004). Coral reefs along Kish's coast support 21 species of coral and have the highest diversity of coral species in any of the islands in the Persian Gulf (Wilson *et al.* 2002). There are many species of mammals and reptiles, and more than 110 species of birds have been recorded on the island (B. Darehshoori, unpubl. data).

The authors conducted fieldwork during the period 15–18 October 2007 by walking along two line-transects 1 km long by 100 m wide in the east and southeast of the island, and counting all birds, with special attention being given to Red-vented Bulbuls. Direct observations were made with binoculars (10x42 Swarovski) and a telescope (10x60 Swarovski). Observations were made twice each day, in the early morning (05:00–11:00 hrs) and in the late afternoon (16:00–18:00 hrs).

During the survey period, we visited several parts of the island, the east, southeast and

northeast coasts and hinterland, and also locations on the north, west and some parts of the south coast. Our only successes were a flock of eight Red-vented Bulbuls at around Sabet Aviary (as free not as cage birds), in the southeast part of Kish Island, and 17 birds in about 30 ha of gardens around Pars-Abad Boulevard & the Club of the Kish Free Zone Organization only 2 km away (Figs. 1–2).

The Red-vented Bulbul has been introduced to many Pacific Islands and countries such as Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Tonga, the United States, New Zealand (possibly extinct) and Australia (regionally extinct) (ISSG Database 2005, IUCN Red List 2007). There are many reports of its occurrence as an escaped cage-bird or introduced species in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman (Nation *et al.* 1997) and UAE (Lever 2005), where it is now common in urban areas such as Dubai (Wikipedia 2008). It is possible that the bird, now established in the Persian Gulf, has expanded its range to reach Kish Island of its own accord, but as there are no reports of the species on any other Iranian islands or along the mainland coast of Iran, it seems more likely that it occurs on Kish Island as a result of accidental or deliberate introduction by man.

The Red-vented Bulbuls seen during this study had the general morphological characters of the species and closely resembled birds photographed in countries along the south side of the Persian Gulf. A few juveniles were observed with plumage similar to the adults, but paler and with pinkish undertail coverts. In general, the Red-vented Bulbuls on Kish Island are associated with human habitation (especially plantations of trees and gardens in populated areas).

The Red-vented Bulbul sometimes associates with the White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis*, and individuals had intermediate characteristics such as orange-reddish vent suggesting that the two species occasionally may interbreed (Nation *et al.* 1997). A number of

apparent hybrids with orange-reddish vent, appearance of bill and head more that of Red-vented Bulbul but with white cheeks and darker edges to the wings (primaries and secondaries) than seen on White-eared Bulbuls have been observed on Kish Island (Fig.3).

The Red-vented Bulbuls observed on Kish Island had melodious, song-like vocalizations given mainly in the evening and early in the morning, and loud simple calls especially when feeding. It has been reported that the species uses six types of vocal signals, namely for contact, roosting, alarm, twittering, distress and begging (Kumar & Bhatt 2000).

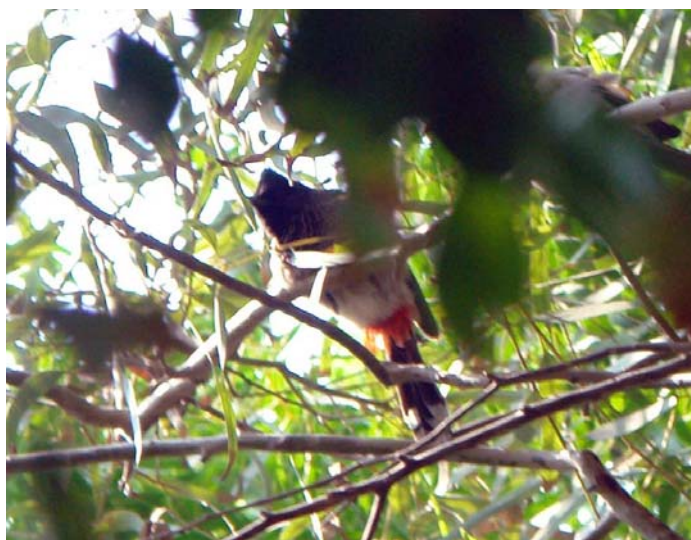


Figure 1. Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* at Sabet Aviary, Kish Island, 15 October 2007. © F. Azin.



Figure 2. Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*, Kish Island, 17 October 2007. © S.M. Nosrati.

No nest was found on the island but the presence of juvenile and seemingly hybrid birds demonstrates that the bulbuls are breeding. They showed aggressive behaviour including raising the crest and fluffing out the body feathers, especially when feeding. The Red-vented Bulbul is known to breed year round in parts of its range, producing up to three broods per season (ISSG Database 2005). If this is the case on Kish Island, it is predicted that the species will have a rapid population growth on the island. It would therefore be desirable to carry out a comprehensive study of the distribution, numbers, trends, breeding biology and habitat preferences of the species on Kish Island, and to search for it elsewhere along the Persian Gulf coast of Iran.

The Red-vented Bulbul has been included in the top 100 of the world's worst invasive species because it can destroy fruit, flowers, beans and other agricultural products and also help in the spread of other invasive species (ISSG Database 2005). It would therefore be desirable to impose severe restrictions on the captive breeding and trade of the species in an attempt to prevent further introductions elsewhere in Iran.

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Figure 3. A hybrid Red vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* x White-eared Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucotis* (in the right-hand corner) in the Mesquite gardens around Pars-Abad Boulevard and the Club of the Kish Free Zone Organization, Kish Island, 17 October 2007. © S.M. Nosrati.

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