



# BOLBOL “NIGHTINGALE” I. THE BIRD

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## i. The Bird

The term *bolbol* is applied to at least three species of the genus *Luscinia* (fam. Turdidae): *L. megarhynchos* “nightingale” (with three subspecies), *L. luscinia* “thrush nightingale” (called *bolbol-e kâldâr* “spotted *bolbol*” by Scott et al., p. 311), and *L. svecica* “bluethroat” (called *galûâbî* *ibid.*; with seven subspecies); it is also applied to a singing thrush from another family (Pycnonotidae), *Pycnonotus leucotis* “white-eared bulbul” (*bolbol-e kormâ* “date(-palm) *bolbol*,” *ibid.*, p. 266; for the occurrence of all these species in Iran and their specifications, see Hûe and Étchécopar, pp. 631-37, 796-97, and Scott et al., pp. 311-12, 266; [Figure 1](#)). To Persian lexicographers and poets, however, *bolbol* and its literary equivalents—*hazâr*, *hazâr-dâstân/-dastân*, *andalîb*, and the like—all refer to a single bird, characterized principally by its sweet (*k’oš*) or plaintive (*zâr*) song, supposedly sung for its beloved (*ma’sûq*), the rose (*gol*). Some of the names or epithets for the *bolbol* and some other poetical references do reflect traits of the bird’s behavior. *Hazâr-dâstân* (shortened form *hazâr*, lit. “thousand,” thus “[singing] a thousand themes/melodies”) and *hazâr-âvâ(z)* (lit. “[singing] a thousand songs”) suggest unusual vocal virtuosity. A disparaging epithet *porgûy* “garrulous,” was, however, used by Monjîk Termedî (late 4th/10th century; quoted in Dehḵodâ, s.v. *bolbol*). The belief that the *bolbol* is a night or dawn bird is reflected in designations like *morg-e šabk’ân* “bird that sings at night,” *morg-e saḥar* “dawn bird” (also



*bolbol-e saḥar*[ī] in Sa’dī), and *morḡ-e saḥar*k̄vān “bird that sings at dawn” (cf. the etymology of English “nightingale”: “singer of the night”). A great many verses allude to the separation (*hejrān*, from the same Ar. root as *mohājara* “migration”) of the *bolbol* from its sweetheart and their subsequent reunion (*waṣl*) implying the periodic absence of the *bolbol*; furthermore, the nightingale’s singing takes place in *mawsem-e gol* (season of roses), the spring (cf. Sa’dī’s verse “O *bolbol*, bring [us] the glad tidings of [the approach of] spring, [and] leave the bad news to the owl”; *Golestān*, chap. 8, p. 534).





Figure 1. White-eared bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotis*). By permission of E. Firouz (The Complete Fauna of Iran, London and New York, 2005, p. 165).

Available zoological descriptions explain and occasionally correct these romantic observations. In connection with the differing vocal qualities and powers of the species, *L. luscinia* is said to have the richest and most melodious song, which begins with a characteristic low “*čūk čūk čūk*” and then rises into a ringing crescendo; the song of *L. megarhynchos* is similar but begins with a rather muted “*tīo tīo*” and then develops into a brilliant crescendo in “*tīū tīū*.” The bluethroat’s song is a mixture of the song of *L. megarhynchos* and other species, but it almost always begins with detached notes. Finally, the song of *P. leucotis*, an active and “noisy” thrush, consists of a short staccato phrase that attracts immediate attention (Hüe and Étchépar, loc. cit.). These variations in song may account for the range of epithets for the *bolbol* in Persian poetry: On the one hand are those compounded with *k<sup>voš</sup>* “sweet” (e.g., *k<sup>voš</sup>āhang/-āvāz/-nağma/-tarāna/-gūy/-k<sup>vān</sup>*), indicating moderate melodiousness; on the other are those compounded with *ātaš* “fire” (e.g., *-nafas* “fire-breathing,” *-navā* “[singing] a fiery tune,” *-zabān* “having a fiery tongue”), which along with epithets such as *boland-şafīr* “(singing) a high, thin tune” and *rangīn-navā* “(singing) a florid melody,” indicate a higher degree of virtuosity (for these and other epithets, cf. *Farhang-e Ānand Rāj*, s.v. *bolbol*). The popular Persian proverb “The nightingale hatches seven chicks (a year, but only) one of them becomes a nightingale (and the others become *sesks* [warblers])” may well reflect these vocal differences and the popular confusion of *bolbols* with similar but unmusical thrushes (for this proverb, see also Hedāyat, p. 132; Massé, I, p. 189). Incidentally, no female *bolbol* lays seven eggs: In the case of *L. luscinia* and *megarhynchos* the clutch comprises four or five, in that of *L. svecica* five or six (Hüe and Étchépar, loc. cit.). In the *Farhang-e Ānand Rāj* (s.v. *hazār*) it is suggested that the following *bayt* of Ḥāfez (d. 791/1389; p. 153) may indicate that he distinguished ‘*andalīb*’ from *hazār*: “A hundred thousand roses bloomed, but no bird song was heard. What happened to the ‘*andalībān*? What became of the *hazārān*?” Bīrūnī (p. 377) made a similar distinction between *bolbol* and *hazār-dastān*, corresponding respectively to Arabic *bolbol* and ‘*andalīb*. In this connection, Ma’lūf (pp. 170-71) mentions the confusion about *bolbol* and *hazār* in Arabic dictionaries and other texts; “To some Arabs the *bolbol* and the ‘*andalīb* were [the same as] the *hazār*; or perhaps by *bolbol* and the *andalīb* they meant any bird with a melodious voice. Nowadays, Syrians apply *bolbol* to the bird named



*Pycnonotus* by zoologists, which the French and English call by its Arabic name *bulbul*.” Ma’lūf himself does not apply the term *bolbol* to any species of nightingale (he arbitrarily calls *L. megarhynchos* and two of its subspecies *hazār*, *L. luscinia ‘andalīb* and *L. svecica svecica*, and three other subspecies *mosher*, lit. “driving away sleep”). He also quotes a modern Arabic commentary on *Majāni’l-adab*: “From the Arabs’ descriptions of the *bolbol* one gathers that it is a small, quick-moving passerine with a sweet warble and a red beak, which is called *chardonneret* [goldfinch] in French.”

That the *bolbol* sings at night or at dawn is only partly confirmed by scientific observation; in fact, the male sings at any time of day or night during the mating season, though obviously his song is more audible when the environment is relatively quiet. The *bolbol* is migratory (*mohājer*), returning to its Iranian habitat, mating, and nesting between late April and June, which coincides with the blooming of roses. It is only during the mating season that male *bolbols* sing; then they become silent, though roses may continue to bloom for some time, which provides an answer to a question posed by Ḥāfeẓ (p. 160): “O Ḥāfeẓ, who can be told about this strange circumstance that we are *bolbols* silent at the time of roses?” *Bolbols* are “physically and behaviorially very unobtrusive birds, thus often going unnoticed; their presence is betrayed only by their singing”; furthermore, the male and female are alike (Hüe and Étchépar, loc. cit.). These features seem to have led Persian poets and others to consider *bolbols* a species without females, so that the males direct their sexual desires toward roses. Persian mystical lore thus has developed around the *gol o bolbol* “rose and nightingale” motif, comparable to the *šam’ o parvāna* “candle and moth” theme. The *bolbol* as *bīdel* (a disheartened lover), *āšeq-e zār* (a miserable lover), *šeydā* (maddened by love), and the like was supposed neither to sleep nor to eat. In one metaphor the bird has “in his beak a rose petal of a lovely color;” Ḥāfeẓ, p. 290); sometimes, however, he is *mast* “drunk” (cf. ‘Aṭṭār, p. 42, “the *bolbol* entered [the birds’ assembly] *mast-e mast* (completely inebriated),” not with wine but with love of the *gol*. In fact, according to ornithologists, *bolbols* do feed on insects, worms, and berries; white-eared bulbuls also eat dates, causing serious damage to the crop in southern Iran (Hüe and Étchépar, loc. cit.). Their supposed “drunkenness” can be explained by their amatory behavior during the mating season (note that *mast* also means “rutting” in modern Persian).

For a music sample, see [Harāy-āhang-e bolbol](#).



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