

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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A TERAI TEA GARDEN IN MARCH

By

Maureen Thom

Bare shade trees and well-pruned tea bushes are a perfect background for birdwatching at present, though the lack of shade and cover must be anything but a joy to the birds themselves. Fortunately for them, some of the sections are only lightly pruned and they make full use of this. Already, on March 18th, I saw a Common Mynah carrying caterpillars busily into a particularly thick patch, and the Magpie Robins who built last year in the tea to the east of the bungalow are hard at it again. In these still leafy sections, a few winter visitors still linger. Brown Shrikes, and Red-breasted Flycatchers are still with us, and Collared Bushchats were, up to about the 9th. There were at least 2 parties of Tree Pipits around this month, who, disturbed from their investigations under the tea, fly up into the shade trees with their plaintive "peeping", there to wag their tails slowly until all is quiet again, when they drop straight down into the tea. I have not seen Grey-headed Flycatchers at all this month, but the sound of hedge-clipping still indicates the presence of Blyth's Reed Warbler in the heart of a tea bush, and a little patience will be rewarded by seeing it emerge at the top, "clipping" and jerking its tail.

Owls dominated the bird orchestra most of this month, both by day and night - particularly the long lovely rippling and "pu put" of the Barred Owlet. This year I have been able to improve my acquaintance with them, as they sit in daylight in the bare trees. I heard the Common Hawk-cuckoo in full voice, in January in a garden near the Bhutan border but ours only started in the middle of February and can still scarcely

be said to dominate. I heard no koels at all last year, but on the 10th March I heard the first "who are you"? coming tentatively from the direction of the labour lines. There, there are a few crows but they seldom make themselves heard here, so we can enjoy the gentle background music of the Spotted and Red Turtle Doves. Parakeets seem to have ceased their swift noisy excursions through the trees in large flocks this month, though they are far from silent. Other occupations are more interesting now - though I have not spotted any home-making, love-making has begun. The sweetest sounds come from the huge flocks of Red-whiskered Bulbuls who spread themselves over the garden during the day and assemble for roosting with such a delightful crescendo of sound towards dusk, - and of course the daylong warsongs of Magpie Robins and Purple Sunbirds. I have not been able to discover why we have no Blue-throated Barbets to join the chorus. Their calls are an outstanding feature of the neighbouring forest and up into the nearby foothills, but this garden only seems to support a few Lineated Barbets and, of course, many Copper-smiths.

I find the bare trees particularly useful when identifying birds flying overhead, as I've been able, really satisfactorily, to link the sight of Crested Serpent Eagles and Crested Hawk Eagles with their very distinctive calls. One can also examine every incredible antic of Grey-headed Mynahs hunting through shade trees, with their attendant Bronze Drongos and Pied Woodpeckers, and note how bold piracy on the part of the drongos is so good-naturedly tolerated. This is a good garden for Woodpeckers, for I've seen plenty of Golden-backed, as well as Little Scaly-bellied and Yellow-naped, and I examine every ant's nest I see hopefully just now, for the Rufous Woodpeckers I feel sure must be here. I have often wondered if there is something edible in the bark of the shade trees, apart from the insects. They do exude gum. Not only Mynahs of all sorts, but Parakeets too, seem to gnaw at it. Perhaps this accounts for our large populations of the latter, which includes Large, Rose-ringed, Red-breasted and possibly Slaty-headed Parakeets. I have seen no birds eating the seeds, which seems a pity as they are so abundant just now, making a pleasing dry rustling in the wind, - a sound that could be mistaken for rushing water - the rarest sound of all during our celebrated droughts.

At these times I fill shallow "gumlahs" with water and have been richly rewarded. A Himalayan Whistling Thrush bathed and drank morning and evening all through the cold weather up to 12th March, when he disappeared. Jungle Babblers were most amusing to watch. They did not seem to know the techniques at first - they hopped round the bowl discussing it shrilly and for so long that a waiting mynah impatiently took possession. The Babblers looked on with interest, and in due course each ventured to have a "lick and a promise" - that time! They are confirmed and practised bathers now! Rufous Treepies are still nervous. After each tentative dip they spring straight out and even sometimes straight into a branch, frantically fluffed out, only to return a few minutes later to scatter any birds who thought it was their turn. Of the Grey-headed Mynahs, one always seems to "hog" the bowl, gazing round fiercely and splashing vigorously, while the others wait none too patiently, trying to snatch a quick drink or profit from the wilder splashes! Many other birds use the baths, but I wonder how the others exist on the dew, which is so meagre now? - or do they fly to the nearest watercourse, - which is a mere trickle in March?

We have had one really severe dust-storm that tragically demolished a Purple Sunbird's nest earlier this month. As it was in the bougainvillea near the house, I was especially disappointed. The Hoopoe's home should fare better, in a natural hole about 10 feet up a shade tree. I hope to spot a few more nests this month and next. It is blissfully easy to settle down in amongst the tea bushes to watch, temporary unseen by both birds and passers-by - even if it does give me the reputation of being quite the maddest memsahib ever to live in New Chumta!

* * * * *

OUR MAGPIE-ROBINS

By

Leela Nilakanta

Last year, in July, my son had written about the birdhouse nest in our garden. This birdhouse, made of cement asbestos board was attractive to the Magpie-Robins only when the house started disintegrating. In fact it has been such an attraction that again this year it is being used.

Last year the pair of Magpie-Robins that my son wrote about, successfully raised three fledglings. We watched them being taught to fly and to get their own food.

Unfortunately, the male, which had been ringed by us, was shot by one of the neighbourhood boys. My son rescued it but evidently it died as we never saw it again.

The mother bird lamented for a while but continued to be busy with the bringing up of its babies. One of these was ringed by us.

During the course of the year this ringed baby grew up and we realised that it was a male. It paired off with its mother.

On June 9th this year I noticed the female Magpie-Robin flying into the birdhouse with nesting material. So it is the female which chooses its nesting place!

Soon there was hectic activity by both the parents in nest-building. Then occasionally the father bird used to feed the mother when she was brooding.

In the first week of July there was a faint "cheep, cheep" from the nest. As days went by this "cheep, cheep" became louder and more demanding. I got so accustomed to this background noise that I didn't understand when a friend asked me one day "Have you got rats in your roof?" I thought this was a variation of "Have you got bats in your belfry?".

The parents fed the babies with small worms in the beginning but as days went by they took larger worms and even small lizards to their offspring. One day they were tearing to bits what looked like a white toadstool. On closer inspection this turned out to be a piece of tender coconut. So even vegetarian fare is welcome to the fledglings at this stage!

On 13th July, in the afternoon there was a commotion near the drumstick tree where the nest is, with the sparrows chirping and both the Magpie-Robins "chirr-chirr"-ing. I did not take any notice thinking a cat or a snake to be the cause. But after some time I heard the "cheep, cheep" of the baby birds from the tamarind tree in a different part of our garden. I went to investigate, but could find only the parent birds giving the alarm-cry.

It took me over an hour to find where the babies were. I had to sit quietly but even then the parent birds were vary. At last the father lost patience or else the hungry cries became too plaintive for him to ignore. He brought some food and did a swift landing and take-off. Even then the babies were so well hidden that I couldn't spot them.

But by the evening they became bolder. One baby flew onto our dining-room window and after hopping about from latch to sill to top of door managed to fly onto our neighbour's terrace. This one was quite bold and we could watch it from very near.

Meanwhile the other baby flew into our Rangoon-Jasmine bush which is only a few feet off from the ground. We had to watch carefully lest it fall a prey to the prowling cat. This baby was obviously the more nervous of the two. It hesitated for a long time before gathering courage to attempt a flight of a few yards to another bush. But even then it was so clumsy that it fell plonk onto the ground and had to hop into the hedge for safety. The poor thing needed a lot of coaxing from the mother-bird to try any more attempts at flying. Finally it landed on a banana tree and that was the last time I saw it.

We did not hear them the next day or the following few days. We were speculating about their safety when one day the parents were back in their familiar haunts but with only one baby. After another day they have disappeared again though I see flashes of white and black flitting by occasionally. We are hoping that this disappearance is only temporary.

Anyhow because of this nesting activity of the Magpie-Robins in summer we have had a dearth of bird life in our garden. They do not look kindly on any intruder, be it a squirrel or a bird.

* * * * *

A CLIMB UP THE ROHTANG PASS

By

K.S. Lavkumar

The Cuckoos are here, and one has alighted in the tree above my tent and is melodiously calling, the soft up-up-up-up of a Hoopoe can be heard from the forest, and a flight of Minivets has alighted on a tall Spruce, the males glowing with unbelievable intensity against the deep blue of the sky.

Last night was clear and the stars shone with great lustre. A scops Owl calls Woo-hoo and Woo-hoo again.

We started the climb at 7.00 a.m. The sky was clear and the upper slopes of the mountains were bathed in warm, golden morning light. We were in shadow of the great bulk of the pass and a cold wind was blowing down from it. On every occasion I have done this pass, wind has been troublesome. The track starts climbing suddenly behind the last teahouse of Rhalla. It goes up a narrow gully flanked on the left by a sheer cliff rising to perpetual snow. Trees have been cut over the centuries for fire by wayfarers, but high up in inaccessible places oak and pine grow----- . The sunlight is on us and in its warm rays we sit for a rest and look down at Rhalla; we have come high but are still below tree-line and at about 11,000'. A pair of White-capped Redstarts are picking insects--there seem to be lots of these for they are kept very busy indeed. All the food is on the ground and in the sogging wet soil. Small plants are putting out first tentative shoots, and some snow still lies in gullies and in shelter of rocks. The wind is tyrannical, but birds are taking shelter from its blasts behind the many boulders. The Redstarts are very tame and sense like all high altitude birds a warm kinship of life with us. They apraise us with keen eyes and ~~chortle~~ a merry tune which is the first I have heard. Along the raging torrents besides which one normally comes across them, this private conversation is not heard. A large rabble/Hodgson's Pipits flashes up from below and after wheeling around settles down a little way off on the sogging tundra vegetation. Their warmly pinkflushed breasts give a handsome touch to their otherwise drab brown plumage. A Kestrel skims down and the Redstarts ~~scuttle~~ under a large rockslab and the pipits are off. We continue our ascent against the gusty wind.-----We are now close to the snow. The treeline is well below us, though on the opposite side of the infant Beas a few starkly leafless Birch stand out white against the deep blue sky. They make a wonderful scene; a flight of six Snow Pigeon flash past and several Yellow-billed Choughs glide over to take a closer look at us. They are graceful, sleek and soft voiced. Two Red-billed Choughs also fly over. They have longer primaries and are less interested in us. They wheel round and settle on a patch of warm bog free of snow and start probing the wet soil with their long, downcurved, coral-red bills. Three starling-sized birds alight alongside and start hopping around in a manner of outsized chats. In favourable light their almost black colour reveals a glistening, satin blue body with black tail and wings. These are male Grandalas. There are no females around. Clouds are rapidly forming on the pass, and we press on. There is snow all around and the path is trampled through it which becomes deeper and deeper. The incline continues and the going become wearisome. The clouds are thickening and it is getting chilly. Two sparrow-sized birds fly past and alight on a rock protruding from the snow. I halt awhile to glance at them. They are dark brown all over with darker streaks and their faces are a deep glistening crimson, (males of Red-breasted Rosefinch?). Lower down on some other rocks was perched a little bird which bobbed on seeing me and flew away across the snow, I recognised it as a cock Blue-fronted Redstart which is quite common along the Himalayas above the treeline. Its chestnut tail has a black terminal band a diagnostic feature from the Black Redstart which it resembles superficially.

/of

It was 4.30 P.M. when the top of the pass was reached. The clouds had thickened and it was snowing hard. Visibility was cut to a few yards and the pass was desolate and without colour. Suddenly from the vapours around me a large flock of Swifts (Eastern Swifts?) sped low overhead towards Lahoul, then I was left to myself to plod on into the soft snow, only the beaten footprints of earlier travellers showed the way.

There were many birds around, Yellow-billed Choughs, scavenging for food, hesitant Carrion Crows, less pushing than their brethren across the Rohtang in Manali. Red-billed Choughs which are very plentiful in Lahoul and kept to the fields were briskly probing the warm soil. Birds were every where. In pairs, Eastern Meadow Buntings gleaned seeds under cover of rocks, a habit reminding one of the Grey-necked Buntings which visit Saurashtra in winter. Their warm tones blend easily into the dark colours of the open patches left by the melting snow. Flocks of Mountain Finches flew noisily around, and there was a lot of commotion and bickering all the time. These are restless birds and moved around in great flocks. Black Redstarts were staking territories and even the females were singing and it was curious to see a cock and a hen Redstart fiercely fighting. Black Redstarts have an interesting distribution in summer. They seem to cross the main snow range of the Himalayas and once the traveller enters the drier trans Himalayan valleys, this little bird is his constant companion through Lahoul into Tibet. They have a peculiar weezy song which is interspersed with a paper-rustling sound. They are as confiding in their arid summer habitat as they are during winter in shady gardens and groves in India. ---- On a patch of flat ground below the rest house young willows have been planted in beds enclosed by low bunds. These were flooded by clear water from the melting snow and I saw a couple of Grey Wagtails, several brightly attired Yellow-headed Wagtails (Black-backed variety). A Couple of Indian Tree Pipits quietly fed alongside the pools and flocks of Hodgsons ran over the swampy wet turf. Side by side they were easy to compare. A pair of White-capped Redstarts flitted around among the drab pipits. Whistling Thrushes were chasing each other and singing vigorously. Going down to the river, I strolled over the shingle banks hoping to see a Kashmir Dipper, but instead noted a Little Forktail which flew from one boulder to another in midstream. Plumbeous Redstarts were conspicuous by their absence. There were many Snow Pigeons flighting along the sheer cliffs across the river and pairs often flew over to glean among the flats beside the river; they were very confiding. A Chuckoor set up a loud clatter among screes on the other side. Walking up to the Gompa, I was surprised to come across a Rufous-backed Shrike. It was being scolded by Black Redstarts and Mountain Finches all perched atop the great rocks. The shrike paid no heed to their abuses. Sunbathing in the glowing noon sun after a pair of Lammer geyers effortlessly gliding along the immense crags. The effort of crossing the vicious Rohtang was worth all the weariness.

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BIRD WATCHING ON ELEPHANTA ISLAND

By

N.M. Mistry

When, recently, I visited Elephanta island, Bombay, I came away thrilled, not only by the exquisite sculptures of a bygone age, but also by the variegated bird life on this tiny island which has an area of hardly two square miles. On my earlier visits to the island, which were all on holidays, I had hardly noticed any bird life. Evidently, the birds retreat to remoter nooks or desert the island completely when it is invaded by the picnickers from Bombay.

Even as the launch **beared** the pier I saw both brown and black-headed gulls hovering in the sky. The pier on the west side of the island is fairly long and passes by a mangrove swamp. Here were our usual friends, the little waders, - the Spotted Sandpiper, the Little Ringed-Plover and the Little Stint. A Night Heron which was resting in a tree some distance away, took alarm and flew away.

At the end of the pier there is a steep climb to the caves. On **both** sides there are a number of large trees, especially **banyans**, silk-cotton trees and Indian coral trees. There is also a small private orchard to the left of the path. This area seemed to be a great favourite with birds. Before I had reached the caves, hardly a furlong **away** from the pier, I had spotted a pair of Indian Robins, a pair of Small Minivets and a pair of Common Ioras, not to mention Copper-smiths, Mynahs, Magpie-Robins, Common Green Bee-Eaters, Black Drongos, Bulbuls (Red-vented and Red-whiskered), a Tailor Bird and a Spotted Dove. Surprisingly, the birds showed **no** signs of fear and even the Spotted Dove, which seems to consider man as its traditional enemy, showed no inclination to fly away to a safer distance. The colourings of the Male Iora and the Male Small Minivet was a feast for the eye, while the Ioras were singing delightfully. There was also a not uncommon display of ferocity by a pair of Black Drongos which mercilessly attacked a red-vented Bulbul intruding near their nest.* These lion-hearted birds attack any other birds that come near their nest, irrespective of their size, and I have seen a pair of Black Drongos chasing a frightened Crow-Pheasant away from their nest.

After I had seen the caves I took a stroll to the top of the smaller of the two hills and was suitably rewarded by the sight of a Purple Sunbird and a Purple-rumped Sunbird, a White-breasted Kingfisher and a number of White-backed vultures. Near the top where there is a huge canon I saw a solitary Yellow-fronted Pied or Mahratta Woodpecker (*Dryobates Mahrattensis*) working its way slowly up the trunk of a tree in typical Woodpecker fashion. In the valley below, I also heard a long drawn Ki-ree-ree-ree-ree of a Goldenbacked Woodpecker. I also saw the rather rare sight of a crow sipping nectar from the flowers of an Indian Coral tree. We are so accustomed to see this bird feeding on garbage and refuse that it is rather amusing to see it derive its food from flowers. As I finally descended to the pier a Brahminy Kite came gliding majestically overhead.

There is nothing uncommon about the birds I saw on Elephanta island. As a matter of fact, common jungle birds like the Racket-Tailed Drongo, the Green Barbet, the Barred Jungle Owlet, Babblers and Shrikes, were conspicuous by their absence. However, the noteworthy feature is the abundance of bird life there. I saw so many species, in such a small area and in such a short time, that I am sure that any other amateur bird-watcher will not be disappointed, if he goes there on a working day and not a holiday.

* (Ed Note: The reference to drongos attacking a Redvented Bulbul is surprising. Usually Drongos protect this species from being attacked by crows when the Bulbuls nest happens to be near their own. Crows sipping nectar from a Coral tree is in fact quite a common sight in Bombay.)

BROWN FLYCATCHER IN GIR FOREST

By

Lalsinh M. Raol

Early last May I was birdwatching in the Sason Game Sanctuary with the Yuvraj Shri Shivrajkumar of Jasdan, in a particular area of the Kapuriagala which we had selected. This is about four miles from the Sason guest house. The rainfall of the previous monsoon having been very poor, nearly all the nullahs were dry, except for a small puddle in the otherwise dry bed of the Kapuria rivulet, which was surrounded by a grove. Though it was hardly ten to twelve square feet, the area attracted a variety of bird life, possibly because of the insects it harboured.

From twentyfive to thirty feet away, we watched Paradise Flycatchers, Magpie Robins, Tickell's Blue Flycatchers, White-eyes, and White-browed Fantail Flycatchers, to mention only a few. A little later a brown inconspicuous bird came in, settled on a boulder near the water, and began hawking insects from the air. The Yuvraj Saheb identified it as the Brown Flycatcher, adding that it was a rare bird and in fact that this might be the first record for Gir forest.

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A LINNAEAN ALPHABET
(Continued)

By

R.A. Stewart Melliush

SAXICOLA, the bush-chat. Literally a cultivator of, and therefore one who dwells among, rocks. So also we have AGRICOLA, LIMICOLA, MONTICOLA, NEMORICOLA, and PRATINCOLA, which dwell in the fields, in the mud, on the mountains, in woods, and in meadows.

STREPTOPĒLIA DECAOCTŌ is the Collared Dove. The generic name is easily explained, but why deka-oktō, ten-eight? peleia is a Homeric and Sophoclean word for the wild pigeon or stock-dove, evidently from pelos, dusky, ash-coloured. streptos is a collar, properly one of twisted or linked metal, because all the cognate stroph- and strob- words have the sense of twisting or turning. strōbilōs, for example, is a top, or a whirlpool, or a whirlwind, or a pirouette.

SCOLŌPAX, the woodcock. skolōps is a stake or pale, and the reference can only be to the bird's long straight beak.

STAGNATILIS, the Marsh Sandpiper, is a Latin word meaning 'of or belonging to ponds'; stagnum is a pond, swamp or fen, essentially a piece of standing, or stagnant, water.

THRESKIORNIS, ibis. threskos is used in the New Testament to mean religious, and in Herodotus threskeia is religious worship. The name thus relates to the ibis's sanctity in ancient Egypt. 'Whoso slayeth an ibis or an hawk', wrote Herodotus in his description of Egypt, 'whether wittingly or unwittingly, must needs die.' He tells us that the

ibis earned its inviolable status by delivering Egypt from the swarms of winged serpents which used to fly out of Arabia towards Egypt in the spring. The ibises gathered together at a certain pass through which the serpents migrated and 'suffered not the serpents to enter in, but slayed them all.' Herodotus says he actually visited the pass and saw 'serpents' backbones in multitudes not to be described'. There were bones in 'great heaps and lesser heaps and yet smaller still; and there were many of these last'.

The only Indian species of this genus is melanocephala, the White Ibis (melano- means black, and kephalē, head). But the word THRESKIORNITHIDAE is applied to the whole family of ibises and spoonbills.

TEPHRODORNIS, the wood-shrike, and other TEPHRO- words denote the colour of ashes, from tephra, ashes. On the analogy of Terpsichore, the Muse who delighted in dancing, the word TERPSIPHONĒ, used of the paradise flycatcher, means one who delights in speech. I have never heard a sound from a paradise flycatcher myself, but must evidently listen more carefully in future. Of other well known T-words, TINNUNCULUS, the kestrel, and the generic TRINCA haven't yet made sense to me. Mr. Macleod traces TOTANUS to the Italian totano, redshank. TRERON, the green pigeons, probably comes straight from trērōn, meaning timorous or shy. trēō is to flee, from fear. TROCHILOIDES, the specific name for the Dull Green Leaf-Warbler, can only come from trechein trechō, to run about. trochos is anything that runs round, hence a wheel, and trochilos, though now the Leaf Warbler, is in its Greek form the bird which Herodotus describes picking leeches out of the throats of the crocodiles in the Nile and generally, though not necessarily correctly, translated as a sandpiper. The name TROGLODYTES, for the wren genus, is the well known creature which creeps into holes. trōglē is a hole formed by gnawing, like a mouse's hole, from trōgō, to gnaw or nibble, and dutēs is one who creeps or dives into something. The classic Troglodytes were a tribe of Ethiopian cave-men. TROGON sounds like a Greek word, but I am doubtful of its real origin. Could it be a mistake for trūgōn, which is Aristotle's word for the turtle-dove, formed from the verb trūgō, to coo, or make a low murmuring sound?

UPUPA, hoopoe. Latin, and (obviously) imitative of the bird's call. Being trisyllabic, it is a more accurate rendering than the English name.

XIPHIRHYNCHUS, the slender-billed scimitar babbler. The word means sword-beaked, from xiphos, sword, and rhunchos, snout, muzzle, beak or, of an elephant, trunk. Cp. RHYNCHOPS, the skimmer or 'beak-face'; and PLATYRHYNCHUS, the Mallard, whose bill is platus, broad or flat.

All but three of the entries under X in the Synopsis begin with XANTHO-, which means yellow, though Homer uses it of bay or chestnut horses too.

ZOSTERŌPS, white-eye. zōstēr is a girdle or belt; ōps, eye, face or countenance. Hence 'eye with a girdle or ring round it'.

(concluded)

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BIRDWATCHING IN BOMBAY

By

V. Ravi

Some of us were in Bombay this May for the summer vacation, and found a day off for birdwatching near Aarey Milk Colony. We took a leisurely walk to the Vihar Lake area from the Colony - in all, a trek of some 5 miles. Two furlongs away from the Milk Colony we met birds for the first time. They were a pair of Tailor Birds, which species, in fact, kept us company almost throughout our walk. At a place where waste cattle fodder, full of dung, was piled in mounds, a party of Cattle Egrets was probing for insects.

On a tree nearby we were pleased to catch a glimpse of a Red-vented Bulbul. Moving a little further we came across its cousin, a Red-Whiskered Bulbul, perched on a Peepal tree. Then we heard warbler-like calls from a prickly bush, and found that they belonged to a trio of Thick-billed Flowerpeckers, *Dicaeum agile* (Tickell), active little creatures flitting from branch to branch uttering noisy tweets all the time. One of them appeared immature.

At the Check Post on the way to the Kanheri National Park we heard the calls of the Green Barbet and the Indian Wren Warbler. We then came to a Tamarind tree where we promptly mistook a Jungle Crow for some sort of Cuckoo. Later from a dense patch of trees on a hill-side there came what sounded like the call of a Cuckoo. However, we were surprised by the sight of a Racket-tailed Drongo shooting out of the grove. Apparently the Drongo had been imitating the Cuckoo's call.

In a small valley dotted with thick clumps of trees we heard the chirrups of a group of Ioras, and found them among the foliage. A Yellow-throated Sparrow appeared amongst some tall bare trees up the hill. Some time later we took a foot-path into the forest which is the ideal habitat of the Rufous Woodpecker. We found many nests of tree-ants which the Woodpeckers usually share, but we failed to see the birds.

Near Vihar Lake we watched a Large Egret and a few Cattle Egrets at the edge of the water for some time and on our way back in some marshy land alongside the water-pipes of the Tulsi Lake we saw a pair of "Did-he-do-its", Red-vented bulbuls drinking from a leakage in the pipe lines, and one of the beautiful Jerdon's Chloropses as it dashed across from one tree into another. In a grassy swampy patch of ground we sighted what looked like a Moorhen.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Eleven species of birds feeding at a single source of food.

On 18th July at 9-30 a.m. a couple of Jungle Babblers started calling loudly from a garbage-pit in our compound at Kalladikkod Village, Palghat District. This village lies at the foot of the range of hills which separate Coimbatore District from Malabar, and has a rich avifauna. The pit is about 4 feet deep and as long and held all sorts of decaying refuse. On this morning it was a veritable fountain of the instar of termites. When I first noticed it 4 Jungle babblers and a magpie Robin were

feeding. A Black Drongo perched on a mango tree nearby and in the course of a number of neatly executed sallies caught many instars. Four Jungle Crows joined in and the babblers and magpie Robin moved away. The crows appeared to be in two minds whether to catch insects from the air like the Drongo or from the ground. After a few clumsy leaps the crows settled on the ground and caught instars as they emerged from the pit. Four Treepies and two House Crows joined the fray all feeding from the ground. As the tree-pies appeared the Black Drongo left the scene but a Racket-tailed Drongo joined in. This latter bird operated from a lower trajectory and unlike the black drongo did not return to a branch each time it had caught an instar. Three other species operated only in the air. These were, a redvented bulbul, and two each of the tailor bird and gold-fronted chloropsis. The Treepies fed on the ground but repeatedly returned to a tree.

For about 20 minutes an area of about 10 feet square around the pit was seething with activity of about 20 birds of different species each reaping a good harvest in its own style. At about 10.00 a.m. the Jungle Crows left the scene temporarily and the magpie Robin and babblers were once again seen in action. At 10.15 a pair of Scarlet minivets visited the area, but only the female caught termites. The gold-fronted chloropsis and tailorbirds operated together for a few minutes and when I visited the place at 12.00 a.m. a Jungle Crow alone was present.

Thus for a space of half-an-hour about twenty birds of eleven different species fed from the same source of food irrespective of their exact ecological niche.

D.N. Mathew
Bombay

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Pied Crested Cuckoo

In the July issue of the Newsletter there is a discussion about dates of arrival of Pied crested Cuckoo in various parts of the country. In this connection I have to mention that in last summer vacation I was at Village Keotgama in the Samastipur subdivision of Darbhanga District of Bihar. There I observed one pied crested Cuckoo on 1st of June this year. This I think is very early date for arrival of pied crested Cuckoo. There was cyclonic rain after two days.

Kameshwar Pd Singh
Barh

* * * * *

Foster Parents

On the top of an electric ceiling fan 2 sparrows persistently and repeatedly made nest throughout the breeding season only to be disappointed every time. A week back, they managed to hatch a chick on their precarious perch but day before yesterday both the parents were slaughtered, one after another, by the blade of the fan as they tried to feed the chick.

There was another pair of sparrows who were always fighting with the late pair for the right of the same place to nest in. When they heard the petious cry of the young chick for food, they started hovering round it for a time and then I saw them bringing food to it. Since then they are doing their arduous duty religiously.

This is the first instance I have seen of sparrows or for that matter any other birds taking over parental duties from dead parents. I wonder if any of your reader has seen this happen.

A. David
Delhi.

* * * * *

Flamingoes in Tamaraikulam

Although Mr. R.A. Steward Melliush's series on 'A Linnaean Alphabet' deals exclusively with etymology I feel that it would not have been inappropriate if he had mentioned the source of pigment for Phoenicopterus. I say this since I was blissfully ignorant of facts until I read Mr. J. Cyril Daniel's review on 'The Nature of Animal Colour by H. Munro Fox' in the J.B.N.H.S., vol.61 No.1 and gathered more information from Mr. Humayun Abdulali's article in the same issue. I still remember how, ever twenty years ago, as a boy, I was fascinated by the first flock of flamingoes that I ever saw. Seeing the flock alight near the 'Tamaraikulam' (= 'Water-lily pond' in Tamil) in Palamcottah* I ran towards the side and then crawled on my belly along the paddy field bunds until I got as close as 30' to the nearest bird. The stilt-like legs, serpentine neck and 'ugly' beak were strange to me despite my earlier visits to the Colombo zoo. As it generally happened whenever I saw any bird for the first time, I forgot the catapult with which I was armed, and simply lay there watching the birds take off in the fashion of airplanes running several yards before getting air-borne. The next day I visited the same site at the same time only to be disappointed at not finding them again. A helpful farmer to whom I explained with excitement the purpose of my visit told me that what I had seen the earlier day were 'Koozhakkada', evidently surmising that I had just been giving him a fanciful description of pelicans. However, I have little doubt that what I saw on that glorious day was a flock of flamingoes and I no longer wonder any I did not notice anything 'rosy' in the plumage. The pigment could have been lost during the migratory flight.

Lancelot E. Thomas
Calicut

* Palamcottah and Tirunelveli are contiguous municipalities

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Reef Herons in the Khadakwasla Lake

In the July issue of the "Newsletter", Shri V.N. Kelkar states that he saw a Reef Heron at Poona, and Dr. Salim Ali remarks that Reef-Herons are occasionally blown inland from the coast. However, I have regularly been observing Reef Herons on the Khadakwasla lake, just 14 miles from Poona. Every winter, for the last three years, two Reef Herons have been present on the side of the lake near our house. For the first two years, both birds were slaty with a white patch on the throat. Last year, only one was slaty, the other being white with two grey blotches on the back. Is there any possibility of their being resident here?

Sudhir Vyas
Khadakwasla

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Further observations on Nest made of wire by the Common Crow

It was with amusement that I read Mr. A.S. Gilani's note on "Nest made of wire by the Common Crow". That is one bird that I never allow to nest in my compound not because I am not a birdlover but because crows insist on the area to themselves. Once they lay eggs and hatching proceeds they refuse to allow anybody to walk under the trees.

Once, a couple of years ago a crow nestling had fallen on the ground and in good faith I had gone to pick it up and restore it to its nest. It was a severe peck on the head that drew blood that surprised me and till I had entered the verandah for shelter one or the other of the crow parents swooped down to peck hard at my head and fly up again to let the other have a go. Not only was I unable to pick up the nestling but I was not even allowed to stroll in the compound without being pecked for days afterwards. Then and there I decided that that was one bird that will never nest in my garden again. The moment they start nesting I ask my mali to go up the tree and pull it down and among the sticks I find quite a large number of wire piece lengths tangled together to make a compact whole. The nesting birds fly about but do not attack the intruder at that stage. Instead, they immediately start building again at the same site and repeated pulling down of nests has resulted in no growth of crow population in my compound at least and more than anything else, no terror of being pecked unawares.

Aruna Banerji

(Ed. Note: The editor has had the same experience in his garden. In the breeding season, walking in the garden without a hat is quite a hazard.)

Apologies to Mr. Gilani for referring to him as Gilam in the last issue.

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