

# TIMES CITY

THE TIMES OF INDIA  
BANGALORE

FRIDAY  
8 SEPTEMBER 1989

## A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF OUR HABITAT

The status of birds is a 'thermometer' of the city's health, and when they go with the wind, it is wise to sit up and take note.

By SUMIT CHAKRABERTY

**K**NOCK. Knock. Whooo! Whooo!! A round head with large eyes peered out of a hollow in an ancient tree trunk. A squat, brown figure came out fussily, bobbing and staring at the intruder, as if to ask, "What do you want?"

Subramanya grinned happily at his suspicious host, the spotted owl.

Those days, perhaps a decade ago, Subramanya had the addresses of a bevy of his feathered friends, even that of a falcon, a rare southern inhabitant. Of course, the majestic falcon — perched on a twig platform high up on a tall tree, perhaps the discarded nest of a crow — could hardly be expected to exhibit the owl's hospitality, taking off instead with a shrill 'wheeee' when his human visitor arrived, tapping on the trunk.

For 15 years now, S. Subramanya, a scientist at the University of Agricultural Sciences, has had this passion for birds. But his list of bird addresses has shrunk. Many of the old trees have got the axe, and with them have vanished the homes in their hollows and forked branches.

The hole-nesting birds have suffered in another, subtler way too, says **Ranjit Daniels**, a researcher at the Indian Institute of Science. Although, by a stretch of the imagination, the 'garden city' epithet may still fit Bangalore, the native plants have been giving way to exotic varieties introduced under the social forestry programme. For instance, an alien acacia has virtually pushed the Indian one into the wilderness. The foreign trees are favoured because they grow fast and are less dependent on water. But the



local birds have not taken to them, failing to scrape out nests in the harder wood, probably one reason why one doesn't often see a woodpecker these days. Besides, several other families of birds make their homes in ready-made or abandoned holes in trees. Even a tree stump, before it is flattened, deserves a second thought, some of them being ascetic bird 'ashrams'.

Birds have always been a timely indicator of subtle changes in the environment. It was birds which brought home the deadly consequences of DDT persisting in foodchains and ecosystems, without breaking down chemically. The minamata syndrome surfaced in Japan with a dead bird. Similar mercury poisoning has also been suspected in the fish at Bina-ga Bay off the Karwar coast.

Birds, seeing the world the way we do, unlike say bees with ultraviolet vision, are more attuned to us than most other mammals, which depend mainly on their keen sense of smell (having poor vision) and are active at night.

In the old days, before the advent of Davy's safety lamp, every coal mine used to have its complement of lovebirds. A miner would carry a caged lovebird, a sacrificial lamb to carbon monoxide, saving the miner's life provided he kept himself aware of the bird's condition. Similarly, the status of birds is a 'thermometer' of the city's health, and when they go with the wind, it is wise to sit up and take note.

Thankfully, the species of bird-watchers has been a growing fraternity, drawn by the attractions of an outdoor hobby needing little specialisation. One of the most active such groups in the city is the Birdwatchers' Field Club of Bangalore, which this year completed a waterbird census under the auspices of the International Waterfowl Research Bureau, London. For an exercise by an informal group, the coverage was extensive — 97 tanks in and around Bangalore, out of the total 109 tanks larger than 10 ha within a radius of 35 km from the city. About 37,700 birds of 51 species were counted, 87 per cent of them being migrants. A peculiarity was that the South Bangalore tanks were twice as rich as those in the northern part.

According to Subramanya, a key member of the census team, the tanks had their share of "uncommon species and spectacular numbers." At Hoskote tank alone, more than 6000 ducks were counted, and at Hennagara, the tally was about 5000. The most interesting sight was that of over 500 Little Grebes at Varthur tank. The Little Grebe, with diminutive wings, is normally sedentary, changing its habitation only when driven by drought. This chestnut brown duck is an expert diver, vanishing underwater in a flash, leaving scarcely a ripple on the surface. To use Salim Ali's line: "When fired at with a shotgun, the bird has often dived before the charge can reach it!"

See BIRDS, page 6

# woodways-india

THE FURNITURE PEOPLE

BRIGADE ROAD, BANGALORE-560 025 Tel: 568 257, 564 342



# BIRDS: Take them under your wing

Continued from page 1

The barheaded goose or 'Rajhans' was another uncommon visitor seen, 65 of them being counted at the Budigerammani and Hoskote tanks. To the birdwatcher, the musical 'aang, aang' of a 'Rajhans' is unforgettable. All was not well, however.

The census team found, for instance, that village irrigation tanks were no longer safe for birds. Other than the ravages of sewage and other pollutants, and advancing

agricultural fields, the team found that in every third tank, migratory birds were being hunted. At Dodda Tumkur tank, the birdwatchers came across two live 'claptraps'. These are large wooden frames with overlapping nylon nets activated by a pullstring mechanism to capture waders and ducks like the garganey and the pintail which come to the shore for preening.

Talking to villagers, they found poaching was well organised.

Apart from poachers, hunters from the city frequent the village tanks purely for blood sport. If they don't find ducks, they are quite content with shooting pond herons, just for the thrill.

They use muzzle-loading guns with lead pellets.

Birds hit by these pellets may not die immediately.

They succumb eventually to lead poisoning.

On the brighter side, the team found the water birds making the most of the acacia trees planted along the foreshore to meet the villagers' fuelwood requirements. The plants growing in water were a nesting site for coots, duck-like birds which blow their own trumpet. For herons and kingfishers, they were a strategic feeding perch. And for ducks, they

were a refuge. At Jakkur, each of the new plants had at least one munia nest.

As one gets closer to the city, the scene is disheartening. Subramanya remembers spending hours on end at the J.P. Nagar tank watching pheasant-tailed jacana, or lily-trotters as they are called. Its 'pheasant' tail and spider-like toes distribute the weight, enabling the colourful bird to trip along merrily on floating lily

stems and leaves. Now, it's mostly a memory, although a bronzed winged jacana was spotted at Lalbagh recently. Even at Lalbagh, there are threats. Imagine what happens to the jacana, which lays its eggs on partially submerged, floating leaves, when a tank is cleared, say for boating. Even shooting birds may not be as disruptive as the draining of a marsh, which may wipe out an entire colony of nestlings.

The beautiful Black Redstart, with its constantly quivering tail, has not visited Bangalore for three years, or at least none has been seen in all this while. It has been more than a decade since the osprey, a dark brown hawk, was last sighted here. Even the robin, with its jaunty tail and cheery notes, hopping into verandahs, has become a rarity. Once upon a time, there used to be a pair in each garden.



## FOR THE BUDDING BIRDWATCHER

BIRDWATCHING is an outdoor hobby in a class by itself anywhere. In Bangalore, it could be a pursuit even more worth its while, in the absence of the beaches of Bombay or the Ganga of Calcutta. The good thing for a layman is that patience and intelligence are about the only prerequisites for hours of happy watching. You don't have to be a scientist, although it is at the same time a wide open area for research. As M.B. Krishna, a researcher in the Bangalore university zoology department, puts it: "All you need is the inclination."

Of course, like any other hobby, some initiation is a help, and for this one can team up with a group. One informal group is the Birdwatchers' Field Club of Bangalore, which also brings out a newsletter for birdwatchers edited by Zafar Futehally.

Most hardcore birdwatchers seem to complement their hobby with sketching

or photography, especially the former because it makes you pay attention to detail. To get started, the beginner may jot down notes and have a good reference book handy, the standard one being Salim Ali's, The Book of Indian Birds, which costs around Rs 100. A pair of binoculars is an asset. After a fairly short period of time, I have been assured, the twitch of a tail or a flash of colour would suffice to identify a bird. Krishna, however, advises against becoming a mere 'lister'. The real satisfaction is in keenly observing the bird, any bird, to study its behaviour and peculiarities.

The best time for birdwatching is of course early morning—a welcome change from late night parties. One thing you can't appreciate, once you take up this hobby, is a caged bird. Birdwatchers contend it contradicts the meaning of birds to possess them. They prefer their birds to be wild and free to come and go.



The following are the prices in rupees per kilogram of groceries at Janata Bazaar and vegetables and fruits at the horticultural producers' cooperative society (HOP-COMS) as an September 5.

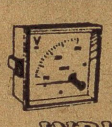
<b>Rice</b>	Chicken (broiler)	◆ 30
Masoori ◆ 5.25	<b>Fish</b>	
Nellore ◆ 5.75	(Fisheries Development Corporation)	
Basmathi ◆ 15.30	Mackarel ◆ 15	
Zeeraksamba ◆ 6.40	Seer ◆ 25	
Sona Masoor ◆ 6.40	Peeled prawns (small)	◆ 21
Hamsa ◆ 4.80	<b>Eggs</b>	
B.S. ◆ 5.25	(a dozen)	◆ 9.00
<b>Pulses</b>	<b>Vegetable</b>	
Tur ◆ 12.20	Beans ◆ 2.80	
Urad ◆ 12.30	Beetroot ◆ 2.00	
Channa ◆ 11.40	Bittergourd ◆ 3.60	
Masoor ◆ 10.30	Brinjal ◆ 1.80	
Moong ◆ 13.00	Cabbage ◆ 2.40	
Moong dal ◆ 12.50	Capsicum ◆ 6.00	
Wheat ◆ 4.25	Carrot ◆ 3.20	
Ragi ◆ 2.80	Cauliflower ◆ 3.00	
Jowar ◆ 4.25	Coconut (single)	◆ 3.00
Sooji (local) ◆ 5.15	Cucumber ◆ 2.00	
Sooji (bansi) ◆ 5.80	Garlic ◆ 6.00	
Sugar ◆ 9.60	Green chillies ◆ 5.00	
Jaggery ◆ 7.55	Ladyfingers ◆ 2.60	
Tamarind ◆ 11.50	Onion ◆ 1.80	
Red chillies ◆ 20.70	Peas ◆ 8.50	
Copra ◆ 33.50	Potato ◆ 2.60	
<b>Edible oils</b>	Tomato ◆ 3.80	
Postman ◆ 33.10	<b>Fruit</b>	
Saffola ◆ 45.10	Apple ◆ 12.00	
Sona ◆ 34.15	Banana (P) ◆ 3.00	
Safal (refined) ◆ 31.55	Banana (Y) ◆ 6.50	
Safal (unrefined) ◆ 26.10	Banana (R) ◆ 6.50	
Gingili ◆ 24.90	Grape (Anab-e-Shahi) ◆ 6.00	
Dalda (loose) ◆ 30.50	Grape (Bangalore blue) ◆ 5.00	
AO (coconut) ◆ 28.90	Mosambi ◆ 4.00	
(500 gm.) ◆ 29.65	Papaya ◆ 2.00	
Parachute (500 gm.) ◆ 29.65	Pomegranate (seedless) ◆ 10.00	
<b>Butter (100 gm.)</b>	Sapota ◆ 6.00	
Amul ◆ 6.30	Guava ◆ 3.00	
Nilgiris ◆ 6.10		
Bangalore dairy ◆ 6.70		
Shree ◆ 5.00		
<b>Meat</b>		
Mutton ◆ 38		

—NAHEED ATAULLA

**THE ASTROLOGICAL MAGAZINE**  
 edited by Dr. B. V. Raman  
 SOME CONTENTS  
 MY EARLY EXPERIENCES IN ASTROLOGY (Editorial)  
 The Coming Parliamentary Elections » Planets and Election Prospects in India » How will Jupiter's Transit of Gemini Affect You » and Other Regular Features  
 OCTOBER 1989 ISSUE Rs. 6.00  
 NOW AVAILABLE WITH YOUR NEAREST NEWSAGENT

**ANNOUNCING ECONOMICAL INTERNATIONAL AIR TICKETS**  
 • BOMBAY-BANGKOK-BOMBAY Rs 4298/-  
 • BOMBAY-BANGKOK-SINGAPORE-BOMBAY Rs 5400/-  
 • BOMBAY-DUBAI-BOMBAY Rs 4187/-  
**Blue Mile TRAVEL** Tel: 564929

**Designer Doors from Mahalsa**  
  
**MAHALSA WOODCRAFTS PRIVATE LIMITED**  
 Sophia's Choice, 7, St. Marks Road, Bangalore - 560 001. PH: 210561

**Prashant Enterprises**  
  
**NOVO INDICATING INSTRUMENTS**  
 CHICKPET, BANGALORE - 560 053

**DEAN'S AUTO CONSULTANTS**  
 ADVISORS FOR BUYERS AND SELLERS OF INDIAN & IMPORTED CARS.  
 Opp Crown Cafe Bangalore-560 025.

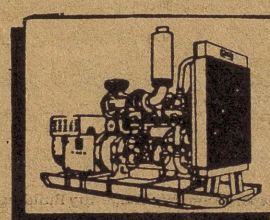
**AUTO CONSULTANT ASSOCIATES**  
 Real Estate Agents  
 Advisors for Buyers and Sellers for: Cars, Scooters, and Motor cycles  
 Gandhinagar, BANGALORE-560 009

**COMPUTER**  
 • Consultancy  
 • Data Processing  
 • Sales & Service  
 • Installations  
 • Training offered at  
**RANK INSTITUTE COMPUTER CENTRE**  
 Benson Town, Bangalore - 46.

**GENERATORS**  
 for INDUSTRIES, BUILDINGS, HOTELS, HOSPITALS, SHOPS, THEATRES etc.  
 0.5 KVA - 1000 KVA  
**Southern Commercial PRIVATE LIMITED**  
 Shekar Bhavan, 26/24, Abshot Layout, Near Windsor Manor Hotel, Sankey Road Cross, Bangalore-560 052. Phone: 27255, 27388.

**Rajvan Auctioneers**  
  
 Infantry Road, Bangalore - 560 001.

**BEST CYCLE CO.**  
 ARCOT SRINIVASACHAR STREET Bangalore-560 053.  
 CYCLE & CYCLE PARTS & STEEL FURNITURE BABY CARS, TRICYCLES, PARAMBALATORS, STROLLERS, BABY WALKERS, SCOOTERS, Etc.,

**Maxwell Marketeers**  
 Power-Cuts Can ruin your business Be Smart Contact:  
 6/3, 2nd A Cross, J.C. Road, Bangalore - 560 002.  
**Ph: Res: 27519 Res: 238348**  
  
 O.E. Assemblers for Kirloskar/Cummins/Leyland Engines with Kirloskar/NGEF Alternators Range - 1 - 1000 KVS