

SERIOUS BIRDWATCHING

Kumar D. Ghorpade

"If I have succeeded in my inquiries, more than others, I owe it less to any superior strength of mind, than to a habit of patient thinking." --- SIR ISAAC NEWTON

The article by Mr L.A. Hill on "Serious Birdwatching" in the July 1976 issue prompts me to write in a similar vein.

A keen birdwatcher with an inclination more towards scientific inquiry than on passive observation, will always set aside some time for reflection; a period of intelligent contemplation, on some phase or aspect of Ornithology that intrigues or puzzles him/her and makes him or her think. It may be something one has seen on one of their field outings, or some statement one has recently read or heard from a second person. Whatever it may be, one always comes across innumerable problems on which one ponders in solitude, consults written works, or discusses it with other ornithologists.

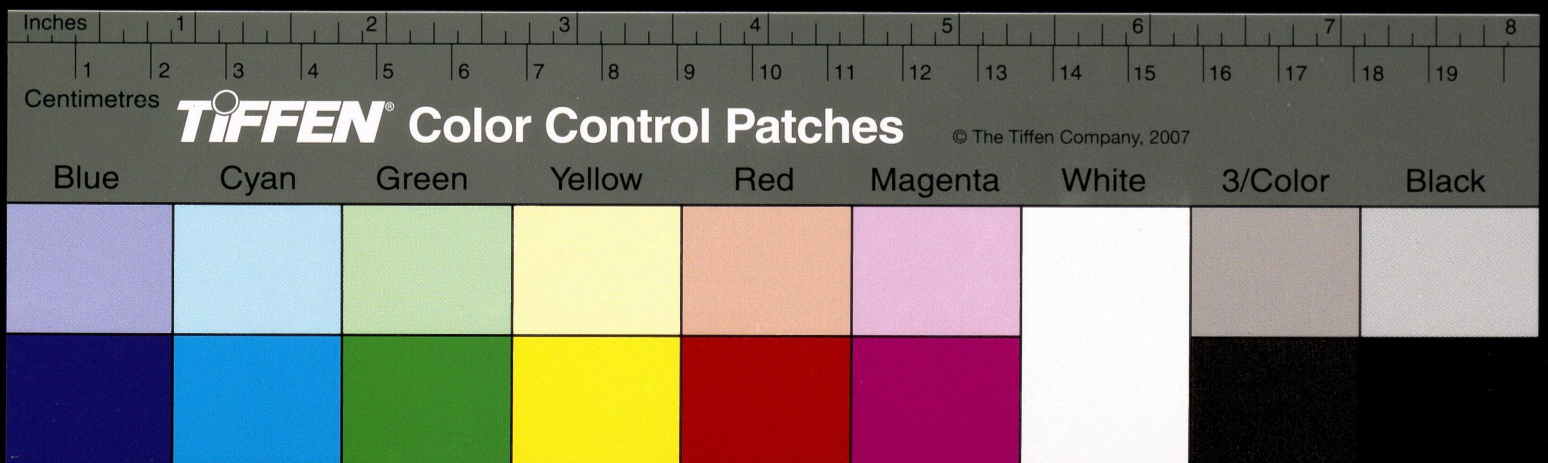
In my "Critique" [Newsletter for Birdwatchers, 13(8): 1-5, 1973], I had indicated some studies that birdwatchers in India could undertake which would contribute substantially to the broader plan of increasing the existing knowledge on the birds of our subcontinent. One of these was the preparation of a faunistic list of bird species occurring in each of the nearly 250 Districts of the Indian Union (some 130 more Districts if Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, the other countries of our subcontinent, are included), by individual birdwatchers, preferably resident in the concerned District, who would have to maintain copious notes on each species on all aspects of its natural history, like status, local movements, habitat, food, behaviour, nesting, etc. I had also attempted to bring to notice, the fact that many gaps in our knowledge of the life history and bionomics of the bird-life of our area are still present which is substantiated by the lacunae in Drs Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley's superb HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, now complete in ten volumes. I would like to stress here that the obliteration of these gaps are the joint responsibility of all birdwatchers stationed in the Indian subcontinent and that the Newsletter should collect all the "stray feathers" of information from them and in time become the main repository of such data which would be available to anyone seeking it. After all, whatever one may think about it and however insignificant its present role may be, I am certain that the Newsletter will graduate one day into a first class ornithological journal meant for India and adjacent countries.

Presumably the above facts are already realised by the rank and file of birdwatchers in our area, and this may seem a needless repetition to many. But mere awareness of the current state of ornithology in India is, to my mind, not enough. I have come to consider the science of bird study as a sort of jig-saw puzzle, the difference being that before fitting the pieces into their correct places on the board, one first has to search for them in the vast and wonderful storebox that is nature. In the preface to the first volume of his celebrated journal, Stray Feathers, Allan Octavian Hume, the 'father' of Indian Ornithology, wrote (in 1873):

"No special scientific knowledge is necessary for the preparation of local faunas -- a man has to only collect steadily in almost any locality for a year or eighteen months, one or two specimens of every species he can come across in his neighbourhood; to note, as far as practicable, in regard to each whether they are rare or common, whether they are permanent residents or seasonal visitants, and if the latter, when they arrive, and when they leave; whether they breed in his neighbourhood, and if so, when; what their nests are like,

23 MAY 1986

BIRD CALL





in the first instance, a correct identification of the bird concerned. With the aid of this handbook it is hoped that the reader -- especially one who is fortunate enough to be residing in the pleasant places away from the haunts of man -- will be enabled to make a beginning towards the filling of some of the glaring gaps in our knowledge of Indian birds.

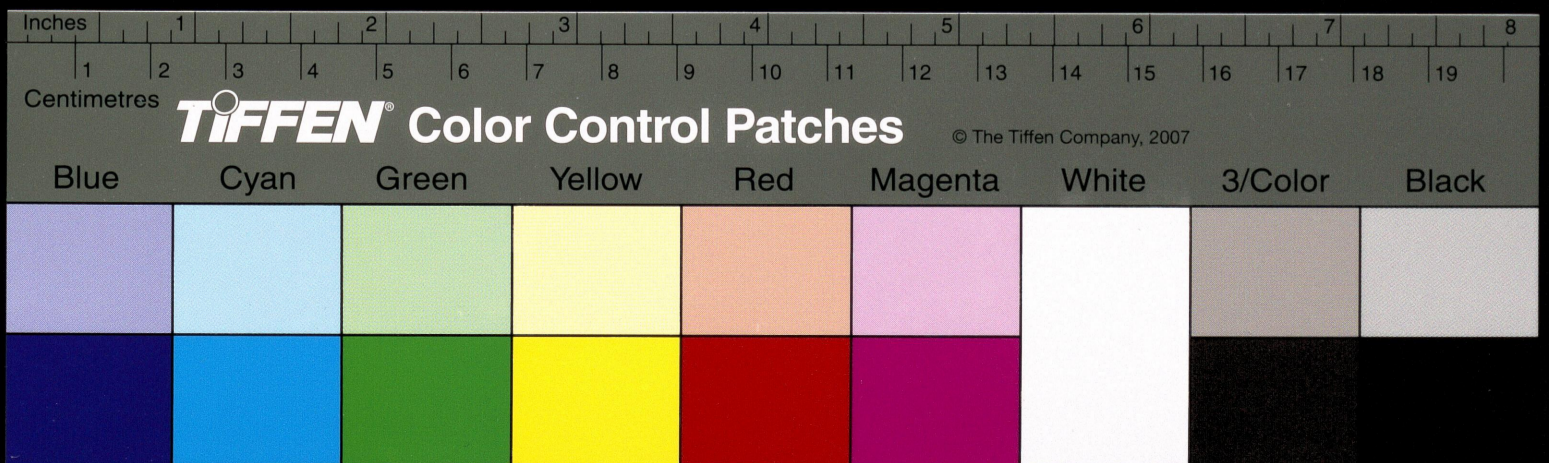
"So little has been recorded about the living bird that almost any notes will be welcome. Information is particularly lacking concerning the habitats in which different birds live, the factors that limit certain species to certain types of habitat; how changes in habitat, brought about by human agency or natural causes, affect the composition of the bird life and the status and populations of its various components. We want precise information about the local migrations of various species, and about the factors upon which these movements depend. We want specific data on the food and feeding habits of birds: what quantity each individual consumes of each food item in different seasons and habitats, and at different stages of its life. It is important to determine by periodical censuses the population strength of a given species in a given habitat and thus be able to evaluate the true extent of the good or harm that a species does to agriculture, forestry, and other human interests and thereupon to devise adequate measures for its encouragement or control.

"In the years to come the importance of this branch of bird study, known as Economic Ornithology, is bound to receive due recognition in our country -- as it has received long since in the West. Therefore apart from the purely aesthetic and morphological angles from which Indian birds have been so far looked at, it is necessary that their utilitarian aspect should also be studied. A very large proportion of species eat insects, the vast majority of which are injurious in the highest degree to agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and allied human industry. Insectivorous birds exercise a very effective control upon insect pests. Owls and the diurnal birds of prey keep a check on the increase of field rats and mice and other vermin. Frugivorous birds are important agents in the dissemination of seeds and in extending the distribution of plants over vast stretches of country. The valuable sandalwood tree in south India, for example, is largely propagated by birds. Other species are specially adapted for a diet of flower nectar in obtaining which they, like bees, do considerable service in cross-pollinating and fertilizing flowers. The activities of some species on the other hand are largely destructive and harmful to man's interests, and the purpose of Economic Ornithology is to strike an accurate balance sheet between the harm and the good that different species do by making complete life-history and ecological studies. It is obvious that in a country like ours, so largely dependant upon agriculture and forestry, the role played by birds is of the highest economic consequence."

I feel I must correct Dr Salim Ali's belief that the 'vast majority' of insects are injurious in the 'highest degree' to man's economy. In fact, the reverse is true: The vast majority of the nearly two to three million species\* of insects estimated to share the earth with us are not injurious to our interests, being either highly beneficial to us or not affecting us at all in any way. Of the 75,000 species of insects so far described and known from our subcontinent, hardly 300 could be categorized as serious pests and the total number of species in our area that have been reported as having attacked man's crops, his livestock or other possessions, or man himself, would not, in any case, be more than 3,000. I leave it to you to work out the percentages for yourself.

Coming back to the subject of this article, I must caution my birdwatcher colleagues that before we tackle the more detailed investigations on our bird species that Dr Salim Ali advocated in the passage reproduced above, one must preferably complete the drawing up of a preliminary list of the avifauna of

\*Present estimates suggest a total of 10-30 million species!





Pl. xerox extra copies

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR BIRDWATCHERS

Members, non-members, and prospective members of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers are requested to kindly complete this Questionnaire and forward it to: Dr Kumar D. Ghorpade, P.O. Box 2564, 123 Brigade Road, Bangalore 560 025, India, at their earliest convenience. Additional copies will be sent if requested (see end of questionnaire). Your cooperation will be much appreciated. Please use extra paper if needed.

1. NAME: ( ) Male ( ) Female
2. ADDRESS: (With Phone Number & Pin Code, please)  
     Home:  
     Place of Work:
3. DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH:
4. PROFESSION:
5. STARTED BIRDWATCHING IN THE YEAR:
6. PERSONAL ORNITHOLOGICAL STATUS:  
     ( ) Professional (employed as a full-time ornithologist)  
     ( ) Semi-professional (employed as a zoologist, entomologist, etc., with partial work responsibility in Ornithology)  
     ( ) Amateur ( ) Serious Ornithologist (carry out scientific work on birds, regularly read scientific journals and publish research papers in them)  
     ( ) Hobby Ornithologist (study or watch birds only for personal pleasure and recreation, do some reading of general bird books and periodicals, write mainly for newsletters and/or newspapers)  
     ( ) Novice (started birdwatching less than a year ago)
7. BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HOW YOU WERE INTRODUCED TO BIRDWATCHING:
8. SPECIAL FIELD(S) OF INTEREST ON BIRDS:
9. EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION(S):
10. OTHER HOBBIES/INTERESTS:
11. DO YOU POSSESS BINOCULARS ?      ( ) Yes      ( ) No      ( ) Can borrow
12. DO YOU POSSESS A CAMERA ?      ( ) Yes      ( ) No      ( ) Can borrow
13. HOW MANY BIRD BOOKS DO YOU POSSESS ?
14. DO YOU SUBSCRIBE TO SCIENTIFIC PERIODICALS ? (Please list them)
15. MEMBERSHIP OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES/ASSOCIATIONS (Please list them)

