

The world of birds

IN 1974 we quit Bombay because our pleasant cottage in the suburbs in Andheri (where sometimes over 30 species of birds could be seen in a week) was beginning to be surrounded by high rise buildings.

We came to Bangalore seeking greenery and quiet and we were not disappointed. Initially we stayed in Palace Orchards, and the *kutroo... kutroo... kutroo* calls of the small green barbet (*Megalaima viridis*) could not be missed by anyone with the least interest in birds. They are entirely arboreal, living on fruits and berries, and so never need to descend to the ground. It is said that in recent years the barbet has become conspicuous in Delhi because of the large-scale planting of *Ficus* trees (Banyans and Peepuls). These *Ficus* trees contribute to the beauty and 'ecology' of Bangalore to an extent which is generally realised. But it is cheering to note that the Karnataka Heritage Society, under the Chairmanship of former Chief Secretary J C Lynn, formulated a project for the protection and registering of all *Ficus* trees. Barbets and other frugivorous birds will certainly welcome this move.

A very attractive and inconspicuous species in the then Palace Orchards were the tiny white eyes (*Zosterops palberosa*). Their habit of being on the inside foliage of trees and shrubs make them difficult to observe. By sibilant whispers, not very audible to our ears, a whole flock can continuously keep in touch. Unlike the barbets, white-eyes are insectivorous, so that they play an important role in keeping our vegetation free from insect pests.

A bird which was very common 25 years ago was the Pied Bush Chat (*Saxicola coprata*). This is a species which is closely associated with a rather specific habitat. Any open area with a few bushes and rocks usually harboured a pair of the black and white male, and its life companion, light brown, more modest and more quiet. The male is fond of strutting about, displaying its presence by its song and flapping movements. Alas, the grassy meadows of the type favoured by these birds have vanished. I now see them occasionally on KEB overhead wires strung across meadows free of human activity. The pied bush chat belongs to a species where the males play no part in domestic chores, leaving to the female to bring up the family. During my wandering in rural Bangalore, I have often found males displaying in the vicinity of their nests while the females were busy incubating. Even the feeding of the chicks is undertaken almost entirely by the female.

A bird with which we were very familiar in Bombay but which seems to have become rare here, is the magpie robbin (*Copsychus solaris*) - a fine vocalist when songs can be quite thrilling. Having been almost completely silent in the non-breeding season, it is in February/March that Nature gives it the signal to start using its vocal-chords in readiness for the breeding season to follow. It

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Birdwatch

ZAFAR FUTEHALLY

starts hesitantly with a few staccato notes but in a few weeks it delivers its famous song early morning from the top of a prominent tree or from the terrace of a building - a veritable treat to hear. In Bombay I attempted to reproduce the song of one nesting in our garden on my violin, just to find out how many notes the song consisted of. At the height of the breeding season it consisted of 17 notes.

House sparrows are now becoming scarce in Bangalore and this is ascribed to the lack of suitable nesting niches in our modern streamlined houses. In 1975 there used to be a few trees in Palace Orchards which were used as a communal roost for hundreds of these passer domesticus. They arrived in batches on this clump of trees, quarreled loudly to secure the safest positions, chirping vigorously for several minutes. Then suddenly all was quiet, and a passerby if he had not witnessed the earlier happening, would have missed the presence of the birds within the trees. Although the house sparrow was our commonest

bird, there are still gaps in our knowledge of its life. For example, some experts believe that these roosts or dormitories are occupied only by the young unmarried sparrows. All the birds which are paired sleep separately around their nesting sites. Salim Ali once suggested that a good way to determine the truth or otherwise of this conjecture would be to throw coloured water on the roosting group for identification. If the same group of coloured birds reappear on the roost on subsequent days, you might begin to know a little more of this aspect of their life history.

A group of birds which need open areas (preferably lawned surfaces) are wagtails, and when we stayed in Palace Orchards one pleasant sight during the evening walk was to see these birds bathing in a puddle by the side of Sankey Lake. Just before sunset literally scores of wagtails of several species - white wagtails, yellow wagtails, grey wagtails, all stood by to take their turn. A few flicks of their wings in the water, a rapid shake for getting rid of the element, and careful combing of the primary feathers made them more airworthy than any man made machine. These birds which come here during winter from as far away as Siberia, are also getting rare. The reason is obvious: we have killed their insect prey by powerful non-specific pesticides - killing even the harmless insects, and these birds which in the old days came to the tropics to avoid the harsh winter of their temperate lands, now find our country difficult to survive in. More and more people are now turning to organic farming for obvious reasons. If the movement grows the wagtails

will continue to delight us by their graceful appearance and lively movements. The prey-predator relationship provides a fascinating study. It is believed that over a period of time predators increase in proportion to the prey available. If this is true and if we decide to rely on natural forces instead of chemical poisons, we may be the ultimate gainers.





A walk with Salim Ali in the countryside was always educative and fascinating. Quite often during these walks while I had heard nothing of significance, he came to a halt and tapped me on the shoulder to alert me to what he was going to say. A couple of instances come to mind. During a walk in the Borivili National Park (now inappropriately renamed Sanjay National Park), in the mid-60s, he pointed in the direction of a barely audible bird call some distance away. "The malabar trogon (*harpaceus fasciatus*)," he said and walked on. After a few seconds he stopped again and said, "Could be the ashy drongo (*dicurus leucophaeus*) imitating the call of the trogon. These resident drongos have a remarkable memory for calls, imitating those even of migratory birds after they have gone away to their northern breeding grounds."

Describing bird calls is not easy. The books say the call of this trogon is throaty and musical and repeated unhurriedly a few times. It is an outstandingly beautiful bird, about the size of a myna, with a black head and throat, and a white collar which separates the dark face from the lovely pink of the underside.

On another occasion, during a stroll in the then wooded Pali Hill in Bombay, there was a small group of ioras (*aegithina tiphia*) on a leafy mango tree. Thirty years ago I could emulate the full octave call of these birds fairly accurately, and always received a response from them in my garden. Here in Pali Hill I seemed to have dialled the wrong number. "Why don't they answer my call?" I asked. "It could be," Salim said, "that there is a slight variation in their calls and yours. Quite often when particular species are isolated locally over long periods, they develop their own special calls. In the case of ioras I have noticed some variations in different geographical areas." Salim was totally deaf in one ear, after an operation for mastoid as early as 1930; but his other ear served him well for the next 60 years.

Why do birds imitate the calls of others - surely not to fool the bird-watcher, though a starling by its whistle made a train in the London Underground leave before time as the driver thought that the whistle came from the guard. Our black drongo imitates to perfection the high pitched shriek of the shikra (*astur badius*) and succeeds in causing a flutter among babblers and others rummaging peacefully on the ground.

I have a pseudo-scientific explanation. Birds with lovely voices of their own, like for example the golden oriole with its fluty whistle, don't envy the call of others. On the other hand drongos, hill mynas and parakeets with their harsh, shrieky, unmusical chatterings like to assume the musical airs of their companions. Serious scientific studies have been done on our hill myna (*gracula relegiosa*), one of our most competent imitators.

Brian Bertram, an English naturalist, spent a long time studying the vocalisations of the

A walk with Salim Ali

Describing bird calls is not easy. But, Salim Ali could do it, even if the bird call was barely audible.



ZAFAR FUTEHALLY



The common iora's nest is made of soft grasses bonded together with cobwebs

Photo: S Sridhar

hill myna in Assam and in the Western Ghats. He arrived at some conclusions which were not unexpected. For example: "There is a very rapid rate of change of dialect with distance, such that birds living more than about 15 kms apart have no call types in common with one another." But in the case of birds in the same area "playback experiments showed that birds can distinguish strangers, neighbours, and their mates by their calls." As far as I know, Bertram was unable to come to definite conclusions about the ecological advantages of the imitator.

Professor John Krebs of Oxford has put forward the "Beau Geste" hypothesis concerning deception. He wondered why in so many bird species the males possess a whole repertoire of song variants. "Is it because they are trying to give the impression that the territory is hopelessly overstocked with males and that competing males should stay away? The hypothesis is named after the fictitious French Legionnaire

who single-handedly defended a fort against an overwhelming force by propping up dead comrades all around the ramparts and firing furiously from behind their backs. He put up such an impressive show that the demoralized enemy slunk off in retreat."

In December 1959, at the suggestion of Salim Ali, I started to edit and produce the monthly Newsletter for Birdwatchers, an effort which still continues on a bi-monthly basis. When he came to Bangalore in 1986, we discussed the progress birdwatching had made in recent years. It was evident from the articles submitted to the Newsletter and other more scientific journals, that a growing number of birdwatchers now identify species with accuracy.

One of the reasons is that there are now a number of illustrated books which make it possible for both the novice and the expert to know more about birds. Apart from the Book of Indian Birds (12th revised and enlarged edition), Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent by Grimmett et al, and a Field Guide to the Birds of India by Krys Kazmierczak, there are several others, less expensive, which have fostered an interest in birdwatching. Fortunately, the National Book Trust continues to reprint some of the earlier books, which are surprisingly cheap by today's standards, and certainly very useful to the novice.

Amateur birdwatchers, after they have learnt to identify common birds, often ask what they should do to ascend the ladder of ornithology. They might be encouraged by the fact that many amateurs keep contributing to ornithology because they often stumble on observations in the field which the scientist in his study has not come across.

It was a school boy who noticed the interesting fact that a dove was drinking like a horse, sucking the liquid without having to raise its head from time to time like a crow, to enable the liquid to trickle down its neck. That observation was the basis for clubbing birds like doves and pigeons in the Order Columbiformes, one of the 16 Orders into which birds are now classified. But while we may chance

on something spectacular there is no substitute for careful observations and notes (made on the spot, as memory is untrustworthy). We could keep notes on the food of different species, the condition of the habitat, the pollination of flowers (pollen could be collected and sent for identification to the institute of Paleobotany in Lucknow).

There is much to be learnt about the life histories even of our commonest birds. Leslie Brown, the well-known expert on birds of prey, spent many years in the Nilgiris but surprisingly he wrote, "I cannot find anywhere a properly detailed account of the nesting of that common bird the Brahminy Kite, though my scant observations have indicated that only the female incubates, and that she is fed on the nest by the male".

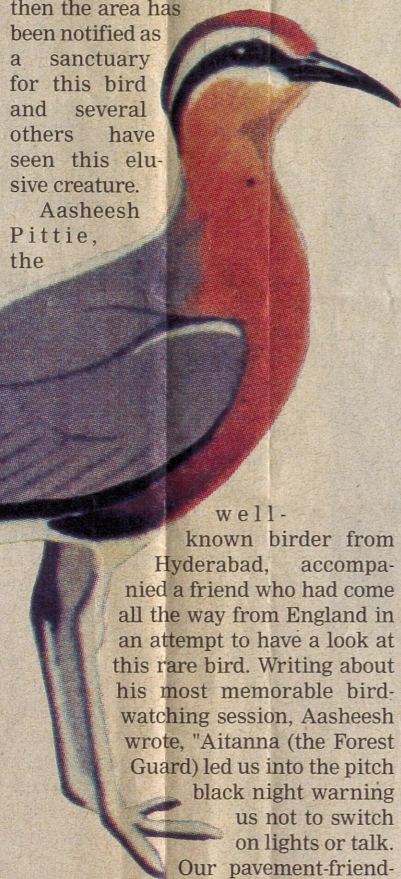
Surely some of our enthusiastic birdwatchers can find out whether Leslie Brown's impression is correct.

Rediscovery of long lost birds

THE rediscovery of a bird which is supposedly extinct is of course a dramatic occasion; and this happened in the case of the Jerdons or Double-banded Courser in Andhra Pradesh. One significant fact which emerges when a rare bird is rediscovered is that we become aware of the importance of micro-habitats for saving an endangered species. It was only because the famous naturalist T C Jerdon (perhaps the first of the genre in India) described the bird and its habitat so accurately that the continuing attempts to rediscover it succeeded. In his *Birds of India* (1864), writing about this *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* (the name now changed to *Cursorius bitorquatus*), Jerdon wrote, "This remarkable plover has hitherto, I believe, only been procured by myself from the hilly country above the Eastern Ghats off Nellore and in Cuddapah. It frequents rocky and undulating ground with thin forest jungle... It is an almost unique instance of a species of plover having such an extremely limited geographical distribution... There were no records of this bird until it was rediscovered in 1986 in the same locality where Jerdon found it. The Bombay Natural History Society generously funded by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the USA sent investigators to scour the country where the bird was first seen almost a hundred years ago, and

Bharat Bhushan had the privilege of setting eyes on the bird again. Since then the area has been notified as a sanctuary for this bird and several others have seen this elusive creature.

Aasheesh Pittie, the



well-known birder from Hyderabad, accompanied a friend who had come all the way from England in an attempt to have a look at this rare bird. Writing about his most memorable bird-watching session, Aasheesh wrote, "Aitanna (the Forest Guard) led us into the pitch black night warning us not to switch on lights or talk. Our pavement-friend-

Rediscovery of rare birds makes us aware of the importance of micro-habitats for saving an endangered species

ly feet had problems negotiating invisible stones and sudden depressions. But the heart pounded with anticipation, and eyes strained after the dancing torch beam that Aitanna flicked haphazardly here and there. Two hours of this and we were trudging hopelessly. Then it happened. The needle glinted in the haystack. *Cursorius bitorquatus* crouched on its long legs and stared at us with its abnormally large nocturnal eyes". So, the fact of it being a nocturnal (not diurnal) species was one of the reasons for the bird to have eluded its pursuers for so long.

Not many of us have the opportunity to see rare birds, but the distant or close cousins of rare species also have fascinating lifestyles. I often enjoyed looking

at Indian coursers (*Cursorius coromandelicus*) in the grasslands near Hebbal. This species is widely distributed and may be found anywhere from North West India to Kanyakumari. They are very dignified birds with beautiful rufous undersides, grey backs, a striking black stripe around the eyes and long ivory coloured legs. They do not take to wing easily. When danger threatens they prefer to crouch and depend on their camouflage to escape pursuers. An interesting evolutionary fact about them is that "like many other running birds they have lost their

hind toe". The hind toe is an impediment on the ground, but for perching birds, of course, it is a great asset. Another case of a bird which had

disappeared for many years but was rediscovered recently is of the forest spotted owlet (*Athene blewitti*). The bird had not been seen for the past 113 years in spite of ornithologists searching for it in the forests on the banks of the Nerbada where the species was last seen. As in the case of Jerdons Courser, the search finally succeeded, and on 25th November 1997, three Americans (one of whom was Ben King, well-known in India for his useful book: *A Field Guide to the Birds of South East Asia*) found the birds in the foothills of Satpura Mountains near Shahada in Maharashtra. Before this sighting the only information relating to these birds, endemic to India, was on the basis of seven specimens collected as long ago as 1880. One of the researchers from the BNHS who is attempting to gather information about the provenance and the ecology of these birds is Parah Ishtiaq. A problem she faces is to distinguish males from females, as there is no difference in the outward appearance of

males and females. Also, the birds apparently look rather similar to the common spotted owlets (*Athene brama*), but experienced ornithologists can tell them apart by the difference in their facial markings.

Some time ago I received an excited call from a lady in Indiranagar saying that her son, a keen birder, had discovered this bird in Bangalore and had taken a photograph. I was quite sure that the photo he had taken was of the common spotted owl and so it turned out to be. Fortunately, the calls of the two species are very different. The spotted owlets only screech, while its rarer cousin has a modicum of a "song". By tape recording the calls of these birds and broadcasting them in likely habitats, and from the response received, the research team is able to make a reasonable estimate of the number of birds that exist. But all this effort at rehabilitating an endangered species will fail if the environment of these birds continues to be eroded; and on this front the news is alarming.

Parah Ishtiaq writes, "Pamela (Rasmussen) and I went to Taloda in search of the forest

owlet. Around 5000 hectares of the plains forest had recently been cleared to serve as a rehabilitation site for people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. About 500 families now live in this area and use the forest resources." Unfortunately then, this endangered species is still in danger.

Incidentally, this bird is associated with one of the most disgraceful attempts by an ornithologist of international standing, claiming to have seen it in the wild, and producing a specimen as incontrovertible evidence, while in fact all that he did was to steal a specimen from the Museum of Natural History in Kensington London and submitting it again as a new find.

This was (to the shock of the ornithologists of the world) Col R Meinertzhagen who in his lifetime was a highly respected naturalist. Salim Ali has some interesting things to say about this dashing and courageous soldier who during World War One, managed to deceive his enemies in many ingenious ways. It was fortunate for Meinertzhagen and his friends that his fraudulent tendencies were discovered only many years after his death.

(Photos - Left: The Indian Courser; Right: The Double-banded Courser Courtesy: Bombay Natural History Society)

Correction

The picture of two Nilgiri Tahrs that appeared in these columns last week was taken by T N Perumal and not by Ameen Ahmed



Deccan Herald 14-10-01

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