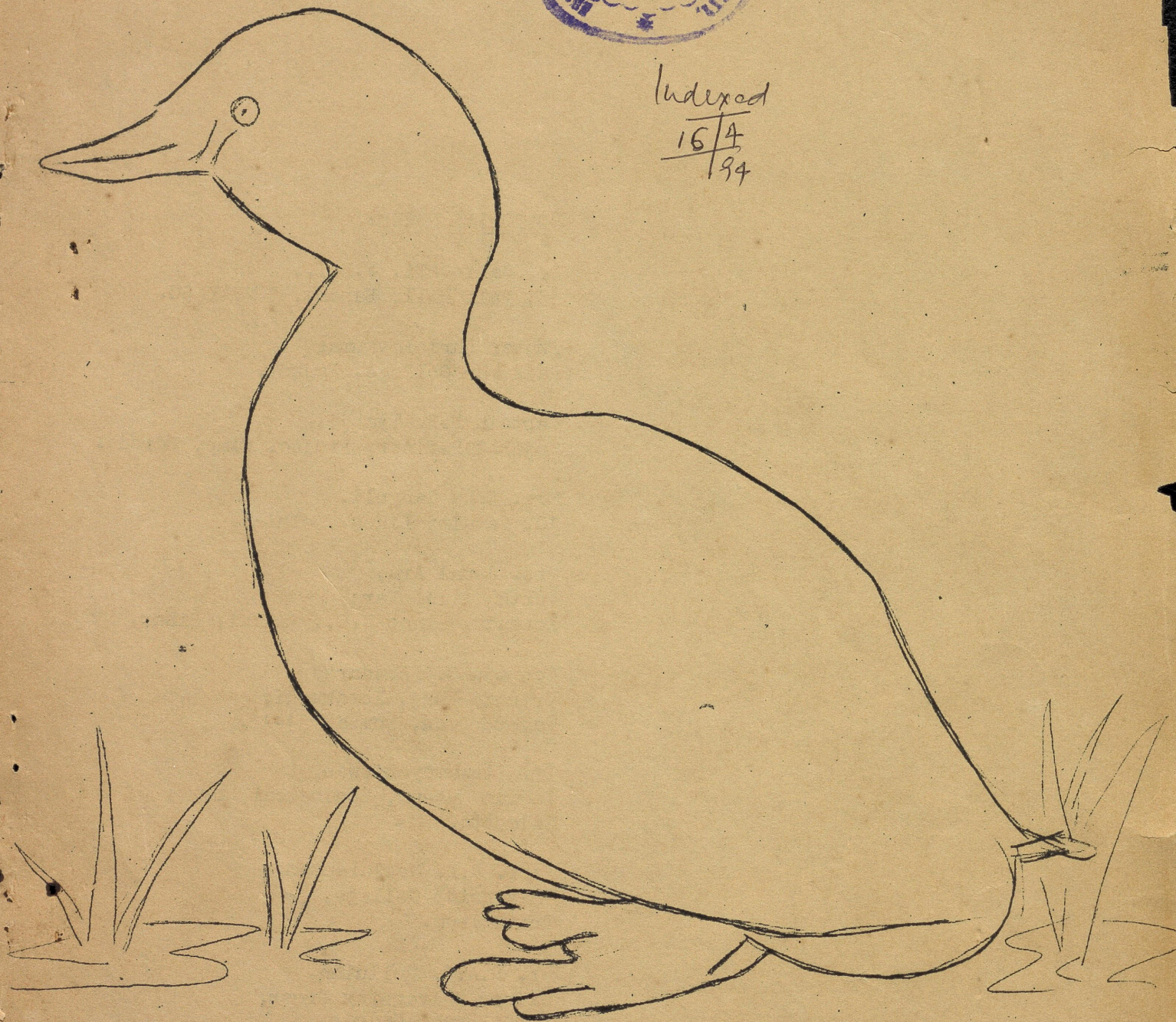


NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDWATCHERS.

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NEWSLETTER
FOR
BIRDWATCHERS

Vol. 6, No. 4

April 1966

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BIRD QUARRELS

By

S. V. Nilakanta

For the purpose of these observations two types of quarrels are omitted. They are

1. Quarrels between predators and prey. This being a serious matter of life and death, is outside the scope of mere quarrels and is also a completely one-sided affair.
2. Quarrels between birds of the same species. This study is one of a fascinating nature and involves social relationship, peck order, selection of mates, nesting sites and such. Observations here are of such a wide scope that they have to be omitted.

This leaves us with quarrels between different species and between the birds and other creatures. Strangely enough, these quarrels seem to be very few because birds are not given to logical reasoning or revengeful action.

That is why, perhaps, earlier this year, I saw a Rufousbacked Shrike and a Blue Rock Thrush sitting on adjoining fence posts on the same building plot. Every now and then one of them would fly down and grab a locust. It is well known that Rufousbacked Shrikes do not tolerate other shrikes poaching on their territory. They are even able to impale their victims on thorns and recover them later, much as a dog buries a bone and recovers it later. Some unwritten law assures the shrike that the impaled insect will not be stolen by another shrike. Yet the shrike was not bothered by the thrush.

This tolerant atmosphere does not prevail on top of the tall pipal tree adjoining my garden. Here, for a few weeks a pair of Green Bee-eaters used to perch and cheer us with their call of tree ree ree. It was also a pleasure to watch them sail out on rainbow wings and catch invisible insects in mid air. Now a pair of Black Drongos which own this tree have returned. The Bee-eaters have vanished.

Although the drongos are not nesting on this tree, they chase away the crows that hang around on the neighbouring coconut trees. The drongos have built

an invisible fish bowl with their treetop as the centre. A crow flying into this region has to apply brakes suddenly and turn away almost as if it has flown blindly into a glass wall. Failure to do so definitely provokes an attack.

Drongos remain there and feed till it becomes quite dark. They have no quarrels with Palm Swifts which hawk for insects at higher levels and these in turn have no quarrels with the pipistrelles which become increasingly numerous as the night comes on.

On the shores of Vihar Lake, however, I have seen Black Drongos and several Bee-eaters hawking for insects in company. Probably in such cases the insects are so numerous that there is plenty for every bird and no need of quarreling. The drongos always returned to their own perches after each sally.

The temporary acquisition of a particular perch seems to give birds an almost human sense of ownership and possession. In front of the shipyard where I work, we have a few mooring buoys for tying up barges. In winter months, at almost any time we may see a few gulls sitting on the buoys. Both Blackheaded and Brownheaded Gulls sit on the buoys without quarreling but Herring Gulls never tolerate the smaller ones. Although they are seen in the company of smaller gulls they are not at all sociable here. That is, no two Herring Gulls are close to each other. One day a Herring Gull vacated the buoy on which it was sitting and alighted on the water about fifty yards away. The buoy was immediately occupied by a Brownheaded Gull. The Herring Gull got off the water with some effort and came back to chase away the Brownheaded Gull. Even though the Herring Gull went back to the water, it would not allow any smaller gull to sit on the buoy.

The hedges and drumstick trees at my place harbour a large number of insects. These are thoroughly sought for by Ashy Wren Warblers, Tailor Birds and in winter by a Blyth's Reed Warbler. Probably the same insects are eaten by all the three species which belong to the same subfamily. The Ashy Wren Warbler often feeds on the ground and seldom ascends to the treetops at a height of thirty feet or so. The Tailor Bird seldom alights on the ground and although at times ascends to the coconut trees at fifty feet, most often feeds at lower levels. The Reed Warbler never descends to the ground and feeds at higher level, especially on its first arrival in autumn. Although they constantly talk to birds of their own species, they take no notice of other birds. (The Reed Warbler constantly makes a tchip, tchip noise although there is no other Reed Warbler to hear it.) They are all on good terms with the Palm Squirrels which give loud warning when a cat comes prowling along.

Suddenly, once a day there is an invasion by a flock of Purple Sunbirds. They come in a noisy group and are mainly interested in the drumstick trees. They hang in most fantastic positions from the most precarious leaf tips and gather tiny insects. They also search all the flowers for nectar and insects. They are the only birds that can hang in mid air and pick off their food.

The Tailor Birds resent this invasion. I have seen rude fisticuffs between a Tailor Bird and a Sunbird where the more agile sunbird definitely won on points. Often when the sunbirds are about, the Tailor birds sulk in the hedges.

I have seen a sunbird pick off a spider from a web in mid air without spoiling the web. This is something a Tailor Bird cannot do. Is it possible for a Tailor Bird to have the human feelings (failings would be more appropriate) of envy and jealousy?

Meanwhile, Ashy Wren Warblers and the Blyth's Reed Warbler make the best of the insects disturbed by the sunbird invasion.

Tailor Birds caught by me have usually pecked me. Here is another quarrel between two creatures more removed in size than a whale and I. Late one afternoon, I caught a sunbird, and for want of anything better to do, gave it a half teaspoon of tea, rich in sugar, remaining in my cold teacup in the

garden. The sunbird immediately stuck out its long tongue and eagerly sipped the syrupy tea. The bird was not at all disturbed by being netted or held in hand. There is the contrast in character between the cheerful sunbird and the brave little Tailor Bird.

Individual birds differ in quarrelsomeness. While some sparrows have nipped me on being caught others have lain deceptively docile till I relaxed and enabled them to make a quick getaway.

On the ground around my house, hoopoes, magpie-robins, and Ashy Wren Warblers may feed without realising that the "other bird" may be depriving them of their food. But not so with nesting sites.

Opposite my house there are two dead coconut trees. One is about 40 feet in height and the other about 80 feet. (A coconut tree grows to destruction.) They are both frondless and have nest holes in the top ten feet. Every year we are disturbed by the raucous and varied call of the Common Myna as well as by the piercing shrieks of Roseringed Parakeets as these two species compete for these nest holes. As there are more than one pair of each species it would be interesting to watch to see how the whole wrangle ends.

The holes in the smaller tree are also used by the Spotted Owlets. No quarrels have been witnessed between the owlets and other birds except that between owlets and crows. Owlets caught in bright daylight are relentlessly chased by crows but both species get on well early morning and late in the evening.

One day, in Madras, I was watching a pair of Goldenbacked Woodpeckers. They were calling each other and tapping tree trunks. All went well until they started at the base of a tad palm tree and worked upwards in spirals. They were at once mobbed by a pair of Common Mynas which were nesting in that tree. The racket made by the mynas brought some more from the neighbourhood. The woodpeckers were driven off but they also made a lot of noise.

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THE FAUNA OF OOTACAMUND AT A CLANCE

By

A. Navarro, S.J.

Last year we decided, along with a small party of students, to spend our October holidays in South India. Our budding ornithologists recommended Ootacamund as an ideal spot for birdwatching. As we had only 12 days at our disposal, we determined to limit our activities to the road that snakes its way from Ootacamund to Kotagiri. We were fortunate to pitch our headquarters at "West-Brook" where the owners of the small tea-estate very kindly allowed us to use their house.

West-Brook is situated almost 6000 ft. above sea level and this gave us a feeling of being on top of the world and close to the pure air of heaven -- an ideal spot for birdwatching. In front of the estate was a large, deeply forested and verdant valley with tea plantation, groves and several patches of eucalyptus. The valley was veined by small sholas, with an intricate network of brooks and rivulets from the surrounding hills -- all of which gave us a sense of living in the neighbourhood of eternity.

As the weather at this time of the year was crisp and invigorating we found ~~our~~ our way up and down the valley easy and unfatiguing. The hills to the rear of West-Brook were mostly covered with young plantations of eucalyptus trees and interspersed with tea shrubs in colourful gardens.

From the information we received locally we came to the conclusion that for practically the last fifty years, except for the topography of the region, vast and radical changes had been taking place. The tea plantations and the overgrowth of eucalyptus have, to a large extent, replaced the exuberant and homogenous feature of the forest so typical of the region.

Now ecology and environment are the main factors that favour prosperous birdlife. Even when birds possess a high degree of adaptability to fit themselves to a new environment, it is the time factor and eventual circumstances that may force them to adapt themselves; but even in this case, it is always on the proviso that between the different environments in which they find themselves, there will always be a certain proportion of affinity to each. Many ornithologists are of the opinion that climatic conditions with various altitudes play an important role here; but this fact, in my view, will not enjoy its full value unless it maintains its own typical flora.

But, here at Ootacamund it turned out to be just the reverse. And why? Obviously, because the eucalyptus trees and the tea plantations do not afford birds either shelter or food. In other words, birds in such a locality are deprived of that shelter and that sense of security which an exuberant and luxuriant forest quite patently offers them. As regards food it should be plain that homogenous vegetation will provide them with food, not only in abundance but of sufficient variety to satisfy the requirements of specific diets in certain species.

Under such circumstances we saw that birdlife, once so superbly flourishing and plentiful in this region of Ootacamund, was at present rather on the decline, not only in variety but in numbers as well. We therefore limited our excursions to the sholas in the beginning. We found the sholas to be rather small and rather distant from one another; in fact, they were almost devoid of birdlife, with hardly a flight of multicoloured denizens to greet our eyes. However, we found a few of them still so thickly covered with vegetation as to be almost impenetrable in some parts. This gave us an idea of what that forest might have been in days long past, before their present denuded condition.

But all was not despair. Along the brooks and rivulets we came across many of the common birds such as bulbuls, babblers, warblers, flycatchers, shrikes, wagtails, and a few Tringas. The slopes of the hills that had not yet fallen under the tyranny of the cultivator were still covered with a light sweep of forest, more or less of bushes and medium-sized trees with plenty of undergrowth. Strangely enough, here were more birds to be seen than elsewhere.

Besides the common varieties we found chats, thrushes, woodpeckers, munias, bee-eaters, drongos crow-pheasants, doves, quails, sunbirds, barbets, parrots, laughing thrushes, and minivets. On the more open countryside we met larks, pipits and wagtails. We also entered some patches of reserved forest. Here we found the Black Bulbuls, Microcelis psaroides -- in large numbers. Then the Velvetfronted Nuthatch and the White-eye were also very numerous. We saw the Yellow and White Browed Bulbul; the Indian Grey Tit, the Chloropsis, the hornbills, and few owls and a fair number of flycatchers. The most common flycatcher was the ubiquitous White-spotted Fantail Flycatcher which was found on every kind of haunt. As for the Nilgiri Laughing Thrushes, we saw hurricanes of them gliding through the reserves and their neighbourhood as well as in the scrap ever-glades. We were fortunate to see a few green pigeons here; but the most common pigeon was the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Columba elphinstoni. The Jungle Wildcock, true to its name, may apparently only be seen on the reserves.

But only once did we behold the Bourdillon's Great-eared Nightjar. On two other occasions and separately, we saw the Wood Cock. These two birds, with the addition of a glorious quintette: Bourdillon's Blackbird, the Nilgiri Laughing Thrush, the Black and Orange Flycatcher, the Nilgiri Verditer Flycatcher and the Little Scaly-bellied Woodpecker, we the most interesting and scientifically satisfying birds we encountered during these holidays. What the odour of lilacs in a New England spring or the scent of orange groves in Valencia would be to a poet, the sight of these exquisite and breath-taking birds were to us.

Against this background of beauty, we noticed the scarcity of birds of prey.

Whatever be the reasons for this paucity of marauders among the feathery tribes, it is possibly an indication of a poor bird population. We did see a few of them on several occasions like the Kestrel, Shikra, and the Tawny Eagle; and on two different occasions we spotted a pair of eagles soaring high into the heavens so that it was not possible to identify them with any degree of certainty. But from their shape and pattern of coloration we presumed that they were one of the two varieties of Fishing Eagles to be found in this region.

Hovering in the sky we noticed the presence of the Nilgiri House Swallow, the Whiterumped Swallow, and the Dusky Crag Martin. It was only late in the evening that we saw a few nightjars. Since at this time of the year they were not calling, it was not possible to certify their identity, except on one or two occasions when we felt certain that they were the Indian Jungle Nightjar.

It is worth recording that perhaps the best part of our stay was the sight of the beautiful forest through which the mountain train from Mettupalaiam wormed its way. As the train zig-zagged its way up the hills we looked in rapture at nature in all her glory and variety. During our holiday we had scouted for full 12 days the hills and valleys from Ootacamund to Kottagiri and enjoyed every hour of it. But now we come to think of it, the picturesque hillsides of the railway track, whose inner beauty and bird treasures were closed to us, were one of the best areas of forest of the Ootacamund region.

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HOW TO, WHEN TO, AND WHY WATCH BIRDS

By

K. S. Iyankumar

Reading through the February issue of the Newsletter, I was drawn to the article on birdwatching at Ranikhet by my kind and charming friend Sh. Usha Ganguli, I was struck by three problems:

1. Which is the right age to start on the hobby?
2. How should a person new to it make a beginning?
3. In what way can this newly acquired interest be continued, and just in passing, what is the value of birdwatching to the person?

In this essay, I wish to take each of these problems and to try and give answers to them.

1. There is no age qualification for starting any new interest in life and this is true of Natural History and Birdwatching in particular. I remember as a student, going out with Sh. Usha Ganguli and she had just started and knew little about birds. This was fifteen years or so ago. Well who can visit Delhi now and being a birdwatcher have no need for her help and advice? A startling ability has been shown by my friend Ialsinh Raol, who only four years ago recognized no birds beyond the usual gamut of household hangers on like crow, pigeons, and sparrows and the like. Today he is a birdwatcher with considerable capabilities. In fact our Rajkot group owes its entire life breath to him. An equally amazing acquisition of bird knowledge has been revealed by another Rajkotian -- Yadav who makes beautiful bird portraits. It has been my happy privilege of being associated with these people from the very beginning. Thus, age has no disqualification and on the contrary, a mature person possibly makes far more spectacular progress once he has decided on taking up any interest.

Quite obviously, in all such cases, a spark of sufficient intensity has to be set off in initiating the process. Younger people, especially

school age children make willing noviciates and learn rapidly; children are interested in everything new and especially animal life proves fascinating and irresistible for small minds. But here, the continuation of the interest is dependent on encouragement from older people -- most of the child naturalists are lost due to lack of interest shown in their hobby by teachers and parents, and most certainly due to lack of opportunities to pursue their pastime as also due to the divergence of interests by more compelling demands on their energies.

2. The second problem has little to it I expect. To start birdwatching, I would simply say start looking and noticing birds! There are many around. Get to develop a habit of wishing every bird you come across with a 'Ah! how do you do?' Follow the important events of their lives, song, fights, nuptials, births, deaths, etc. In fact getting to know birds is like getting to know ones neighbours -- after all birds are our neighbours. If you know all the familiar faces around you, then any new comer in the area will immediately register on you; you greet him and so your number of acquaintances increases in ever widening ripples. Watch birds, the common birds around you, and also listen to them, because sound is by far the best method of locating birds, and new ones at that. To illustrate the point, while engaging a class in a written test, I allowed my mind to note all the familiar bird calls, when all of a sudden I heard a harsh double note which I had not heard before. Strolling out of the classroom I noted a small blue flycatcher in the trees outside ... my first Blacknaped Blue Flycatcher. This bird is a first for Rajkot and the area. I have since then been hearing this call repeatedly through the month suggesting that this bird is spending the non-breeding months with us.

A stage soon arrives when a need for a good book on birds is felt and it is then time to acquire one. This book should not be treated as a reference volume, but one which should be read through, as then we realise the opportunities of what can be looked for in the area, increasing the avidity for adding new names to ones life list. Attempts should also be made to find kindred souls as company for this adds to the pleasure.

The third stage on the way to acquire full status among the birding set needs a good pair of field glasses. These are a high initial cost but over the years, they amply repay the expense. A binocular costing Rs400/- over ten years of service demands a saving of less than Rs4/- a month! In this manner, birdwatching becomes the cheapest hobby imaginable.

3. The interest in birds shown by young people very often as not is relegated with increased demands of a more immediately pressing nature, however the longer and happier the association young people have with the outdoors, the less delible will be the impression on their minds. They will always look around and notice birds. But for active participation, the need is for organisation of regional clubs, easily available advice and cheaply procurable literature on the subject. Newspapers in their weekly editions should be persuaded to give space for local natural history news, while all urbane areas should have parks with jungly corners. Quite often as not the many young bird fanciers are starved of company and guidance till the interest subsides. In this country, I am disappointed to say that there is little or no encouragement for younger naturalists and as often as not discouragement is the first encountered. Looking back over the years, I find that my interest in birds has been a gift of chance and the opportunities my environment by birth bestowed on me. All are not so favourably placed and with greater deploying of natural vegetation and expanding of built-up areas, the chances are getting fewer and fewer. School programmes, serials in popular picture weeklies, well laid out parks, small aviaries in public places, exhibitions of bird subjects by amateur artists, etc. are all in the order of the day.

For adults, once the interest is aroused, all he needs is to get into contact with some kindred soul and there is little chance for his interest to flag. With the years, he will find the 'call' of birds and the great outdoors associated with them irresistible.

Coming to the question of "Why watch birds?" there is first one answer: "Why do anything?". Birds delight the aesthetic susceptibilities of men: their beauty of form, colour and motion are a joy to watch. The problems of their vigorous lives are a challenge to human intelligence. Birdwatching leads a person into varieties of activities by virtue of its many facets — art, scientific query, photography, aviculture, and an outdoor life of the most strenuous type, morning walks, cheerful picnics, fowling, etc. Few hobbies then are more complete, more satisfying for people of all ages, bridging gaps between ages and nations. From the utilitarian view, birds are closely linked with pest control. They destroy vast quantities of insects and rodents, but at times they pilfer crops to the momentary annoyance of cultivators. Yet, on the balance they are by far the vivacious friends of man sharing his unique home the Earth.

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OCCURRENCE OF THE NIGHT HERON NYCTICORAX N. NYCTICORAX
(LINN.) AT ERNAKULAM, KERALA

By

N.G. Pillai

According to the Ornithology of Travancore & Cochin (J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc. Vol. 39:590) and the BIRDS OF TRAVANCORE AND COCHIN (p. 416) the night heron is neither common, nor is there any record of its breeding in this area. Hence, this note on a nesting colony of these birds at Ernakulam may be of interest to your readers.

Nesting is in progress at the time of writing this. The birds are established on a ~~serp~~ grove standing in ~~apxi~~ a private compound, in front of the Ravipuram temple, a well-known Hindu shrine at the southern end of Ernakulam. The temple faces the harbour and is hardly three-quarters of a mile from the waterfront. The grove, almost on the bend of the road which cuts the 70 foot highway, a few yards to the west, is a tangle of trees like the Alstonia, Holigarna and Artocarpus and various bushes, festooned with creepers and hardy climbers. The tallest among the trees is the Alstonia, whose crown must be about 50-60 ft. from the ground.

The birds greeted me with a wild cacophony on the morning of the 22nd February, when I walked up in the direction of the temple. They seemed agitated and my feeling was that they were wrangling for favoured perches as they settled down for the day. Just then one bird after another arrived and landed on the clump with nesting material in its beak and disappeared into the depths of the foliage — which proclaimed that the nesting season was on.

Roughly, there may be about 40-50 birds in the colony, made up of black-capped, black-backed adults and brown-blotched juveniles. No other species was noticed in this company. Among the adults, some had red feet and others yellow ones. The legs of the young birds were a greenish yellow. In carriage and markings, these juveniles reminded one of a curlew, especially when they rested on an exposed woody branch. The calls were a confusion of creaks and croaks, snorts and chuckles, wild shrieks and ~~threaty~~ protests. Amidst this din was an incessant chitz, chitz coming from the depths of the tangle. The leaves of the clump are covered by a white smear with the excrement of the birds and on 16.iii.1966 when I walked past the grove, the odour was quite powerful.

The birds foraged for nest material, not only in the grove itself, but from trees in the neighbourhood, particularly were a Polyalthia and a mango, standing on the bank of the temple tank nearby. The process of gathering the material was leisurely. The birds would settle on one of the smaller branches and tug and pull, first at one twig and then at another, with apparently no judgement about its strength or distance from the perch and quite often they would be thrown off balance. If successful, they flew back immediately to the grove. On the 19th I found them visiting an ancient mango tree weighted with Loranthus nearly half a mile away. Birds came and went from this tree in a regular stream. Both red-legged and yellow-legged individuals were seen to carry twigs to the

nesting site. The nests all seem well hidden in the foliage.

It was last year that I came across these birds at Ernakulam for the first time on 2.iv.1965 to be exact, at the same serpent grove. There were then about 20-30 birds, composed of adults and young, which remained at this spot till 23.vi.1965. No nesting activity was noticed during this time. Crows used to harass them and Pariah Kites sometimes dived low to investigate the bickerings in the gathering. People of the locality were familiar with the bird and gave me the name Pakal-Unna which freely translated would mean 'daytime diner'.

Only once during his 6-month survey of the birds of Travancore and Cochin in 1933, did Dr. Salim Ali come across the night heron — a small colony which roosted on the banks of the Ponnani River. In my own experience too, I have only once instance of a bird being seen, at Tiruvallom, on the outskirts of Trivandrum — a specimen in the hands of a local shikari, with his fingers round its neck and the bird's feet dangling in the air, much like a domestic duck being taken to the market — and that many years ago. But Ferguson's (once Director of the Trivandrum Museum) collectors are reported to have found this species fairly common at Perumbalom in N. Travancore and at other places round the Venbanad Lake, where they are apparently protected by the inhabitants. Perumbalom is hardly 10 miles from Ernakulam, due south. This fact and the birds' apparent predilection for serpent groves, which confer on them a certain immunity, seem to lend support to Mr. Ferguson's view. Perhaps the night heron is not so scarce a bird as it is taken to be in this area.

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THE ROOSTING OF HOUSE SPARROWS

By

Stanley Cramp

(Reproduced by kind permission of Wild Life Observer, Dec. 1965)

For any bird a safe place to sleep at night is as essential as adequate food or a secure nest site. Yet roosting habits have been less studied by naturalists than breeding or food, and though much has been written on the communal roosts of starlings, rooks and gulls, we still have a great deal to learn about the roosting habits of even such a common bird as the house sparrow.

A few years ago I tried to find all the communal roosts of sparrows in an area of some $3\frac{1}{2}$ square miles of central London, centred on Bloomsbury, where I live. I managed to track down 24 different roosts in this relatively small area, varying in size from 20 to 2,100 birds. There were more roosts than I had expected, but even so I almost certainly overlooked some, for sparrow roosts are harder to find than starling roosts. They are usually less noisy and much smaller; moreover sparrows fly to them in small parties, or even ones and twos, often not in a very direct line, whilst the large bustling flocks of starlings fly so straight that you can often deduce the approximate site of a roost from a few observations made in different sectors several miles from it. And not all the chirping gatherings of sparrows towards dusk, known in London as sparrows' chapels, are in fact roosts. If you wait patiently you may find that as it grows darker the birds slip away to roost elsewhere, or retire to their nest-holes nearby.

ON THE EMBANKMENT

I started my investigations in July, when the roosts are hardest to find. They were all small then, none holding more than fifty birds, because the adult sparrows were still breeding and mostly roosting in their nests, and the leaves on the trees and creepers easily hid the sleeping forms. As the autumn progressed, most of these small roosts were gradually deserted and fewer, but much larger roosts were formed, all of which were in plane trees. Two of them, in Euston Square and along the embankment by the Thames, held over 2,000 sparrows in mid-winter, although it would seem that the bare branches of the planes could give little protection during the long cold nights. The sparrows slept on the lower branches, from about twenty feet upwards, and in several cases flocks of

starlings occupied the tops of the trees. Most starlings prefer the more sheltered ledges on buildings in the winter months, but I have only once found sparrows roosting on a building — a mere handful of birds scattered among the crevices of an ornamented stone porch. Yet many sparrows, of course, roost in buildings — in their nest-holes, and you can see sparrows taking material to their nests outside the breeding season to keep their sleeping quarters in good repair.

During the winter, the total numbers of sparrows at the big roosts did not vary greatly (despite some irregular fluctuations which suggested that some birds at times changed from one roost to another), but in April there was a very sharp drop in numbers just before nesting began in earnest, and by May and June I could find only a handful of birds using communal roosts.

SUBURBAN ROOSTS

During the winter I also tried to map the gathering areas of the main roosts. These were irregular in shape, and overlapped in places; most sparrows flew only a few hundred yards to sleep, and none flew more than 1-4 miles. On the outskirts of London, however, some sparrows must fly much further, for even in winter larger sparrow roosts have been recorded, despite a lower density of sparrows in the suburbs, while one late autumn roost, when young birds swell the population, held about 19,000 sparrows. Even this pales besides a roost reported from Egypt in the late summer which held about one hundred thousand house sparrows.

Different species vary greatly in the amount of time they spend sleeping, and usually those that retire late rise early — and not the reverse as at first you might expect. This may well be connected with the need to get enough food, especially in the short days of winter. Sparrows, which can usually rely on ample supplies of bread put out for them in London as elsewhere, are amongst the first birds to go to roost and the last to awaken. In winter, almost all are gathered in the roost before sunset, and most of them up to half an hour or so before this, and they do not leave until sunrise or even later, long after the blackbirds and starlings are up and about.

PRIVATE HOLES

Sparrows, like starlings, will roost both communally and in their nest-holes. Why do some prefer warm holes, while others choose the bare branches of trees (and some even switch between the two)? In his monograph of the house sparrow (Collins, 1963) Dr Summers-Smith has suggested that sparrows prefer to roost in holes, but when these are in short supply will roost communally. In my study area, from a rough calculation based on sample densities, I believed that well over 50 per cent used the communal roosts, although I knew of numbers of suitable but unused nest holes. However, Summers-Smith suggests that climate might also be a factor; in higher latitudes the sparrows must use holes to survive during the severe winters, whereas further south they are free to choose and communal roosts are more frequent. Certainly, his sparrows in a suburb in north-east England had no communal roost, whereas further south in central London, which is several degrees warmer at night than even the surrounding countryside, over half the sparrows preferred to roost socially, and in southern Spain and France I have seen much larger sparrow roosts than any I have met in Britain.

Still much of this is speculation, and a definite answer can only be given where there have been more careful studies of sparrow roosting habits in different parts of the country. This needs care and patience, and for most people has the disadvantage that in winter it can only be done at the weekends. But it's certainly exciting, and anyone might help to answer one of the many puzzles about the roosting of house sparrows.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Bombay group is reminded of the request made earlier about submitting a list of all birds seen in the Tulsi Lake area during this season. The authorities of the Aarey Milk Colony are interested in having such a list on hand — perhaps with the ultimate object of being able to hand it out to visitors of the National Park and encourage the hobby of birdwatching. Kindly therefore send a list of your observations to the Editor by 30th May this year.

It is nice to be able to correspond with birdwatching friends in Pakistan again now that mail services have been resumed. Mr. T. J. Roberts has sent in a fine piece on the birds of Manchar Lake; for the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society. After it appears in the Journal permission will be sought to reproduce it in this Newsletter.

Readers will perhaps find the extract from the Wild Life Observer interesting and helpful and will indicate how we can set about studying sparrows at their roost. Almost every town in India has sparrow roosts which are easy to observe.

CORRESPONDENCE

Baikal Teal in Rajasthan

On 4th January 1966, I happened to be in a duck shoot at Kharwa, a place about 30 miles from Ajmer. This was arranged by the Thakur Saheb of Kharwa, a keen shikari.

During the shoot, a duck was picked up, very near to where I was sitting with my binoculars. I asked the picker to bring it to me as it seemed to me a little peculiar in colour. I could not identify it when it was brought to me except that it was a teal of some kind. When the shoot was over, I asked this duck to be identified. No one present there could identify. H.H. of Kisengarh emphatically said: 'I have never seen this duck shot in Rajasthan.' We all were a little excited and on return to the Palace consulted a book on Game Birds of India, a very old but finely illustrated book, published in 1890. I forget the name of the author. This book had an illustration comparable to the teal. On closer examination after reading its description, we found that it was a Baikal Teal. It said that Baikal Teal is a rare straggler in India and its regular path of migration falls further east of India. With their permission, I brought the teal for skinning. Later on, I consulted Stuart Baker and Whistler. Both say, it is a rare straggler.

Many years have passed since these books were published. I would like to know if this teal is still considered a rare straggler or has any change been noticed.

I have skinned this teal and it now hangs in our Museum. I will have to take more care, if I know that it is rare.

R.N. Chatterjee
Mayo College, Ajmere

"Placing the Family" - Some Comments

I wish to make the following comments in reference to Mrs. Jamal Ara's article "Placing the Family" in Newsletter for December 1965.

Mrs. Jamal-Ara in her classification of birds in her article has made certain statements which are not correct. For example, in Accipitres: Diurnal birds of prey, she states that: "The eggs are white and never more than two." Now this is far from correct as many birds of prey lay as many as three to five eggs. Nor are all birds of prey lay white eggs. These statements cannot be generalized.

generalized.

This kind of article is not based on facts and hence would be very misleading to a novice.

Mrs. Janal Ara also says: "They are vegetarians (this is evidently a slip of the pen or a printing error) and often destructive." Now birds of prey are no more destructive than a lot of other birds, especially seed-eating birds. Birds of prey may sometimes take a young domestic fowl or so but because of that they cannot be branded as destructive.

I would like to make it clear that my intention is not to criticise Mrs. Janal Ara, who contributes articles quite regularly to the Newsletter, which is far more than I can say for myself. All I wish to say is that it would be much better if members restricted their statements to facts.

K.R. Sethna

Mylenoney Estate, Chikmagalur Dist.
Mysore

A Correction - Mrs. Janal Ara's reply to above

I am grateful to Mr. K.R. Sethna for pointing out the unfortunate mistake which was a typing error confusing two different articles. Due to oversight on my part it went to press uncorrected. On reading the Newsletter I wanted to send the correction but due to my present mental condition it slipped my mind completely.

It should read as follows:

"The eggs are either spotted with red or are plain white. One or more in number. The birds of prey are essentially carnivorous, and as a whole are exceedingly useful, either as scavengers or as destroyers of vermin and insects".

I am exceedingly grateful for criticism of any kind pointing out such errors.

Mrs. Janal Ara

Zafar Futehally
Editor: Newsletter for Birdwatchers -
32-A Juhu Lane, Andheri, Bombay 58 - AS



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