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MORE ABOUT THE BIRDS OF THEKKADY

By

K.K. Neelakantan

The attractiveness, to the bird-watcher, of the Thekkady Wild Life Sanctuary has been stressed by earlier contributors, particularly by Mrs. Usha Ganguly (NEWSLETTER, October-1964) and Dr. Miss Mani (N.L. for February-1965). Unfortunately this wonderful place is about to lose a great deal of its charm because of 'developmental activities' such as providing living quarters for the staff and additional amenities for the tourist. As has been pointed out in the earlier notes, the only place where one can see birds to one's heart's content is the patch of forest lying between the Aranya Nivas Hotel and the approach to the Sanctuary. This area was, till recently, carefully preserved to retain, to the fullest extent possible in the circumstances, the very "feel" of the forest. The buildings put up were so situated that they did not obtrude. The short walk from the II Class Tourist Home to Aranya Nivas was, but for the tarred road and the neat labels on the trees, a stroll through virgin forest. Flocks of Grackles, Yellowbrowed Bulbuls, scattered pairs or parties of Racket-tailed Drongos, Green Barbets and Malabar Grey Hornbills filled the place with appropriate sounds. The presence as well as the voices of parties of the Black Langur and the numerous Giant Squirrels that

disported fearlessly in the branches above one's head could give the lonely stroller a greater thrill than all the elephants seen from a cruising motor boat!

This state of affairs is fast changing. I was at Thekkady on a brief visit at the end of April (1965), and was disheartened to see that a number of forest giants had been felled to provide room for a long line of buildings. The plan seems to be to convert the Aranya Nivas area into a 'township' so that the tourist would feel quite at home when on his few hours' dash through the Sanctuary. One naturally wonders whether the wishes of the right type of tourist have been consulted before deciding that these 'amenities' were urgently required.

Anyone who has been to Thekkady will know that it is only when walking through the woods between Aranya Nivas and the entrance to the Sanctuary that one is really conscious of the forest. The vaunted boat-trip on the lake is hardly more exciting than a visit to the zoo. It wouldn't surprise me if, as a result of the conversion of this place into a township, the number of visitors was considerably reduced. I hope that before it is too late, the idea of developing the neighbourhood of Aranya Nivas into a township will be given up. If the influx of tourists demands the provision of such a township, it could be sited just outside the Sanctuary area, on the Kumili-Thekkady road. Transport to the boat jetty could be provided by the administration or some private company.

* * * * *

I reached Thekkady at 5 P.M. on the 28th and left at 10 A.M. on the 30th. Bad weather and other factors were a serious handicap to bird-watching, and I had to be content with casual observations. Also, I was more keen on adding the Rufous Woodpecker at least to my Lifelist than on making a note of all birds seen etc.

Though I did not see any Rufous Woodpecker, I drew some consolation prizes. The first of these was the turrell I had when, hoping against hope, I looked up into the giant bombax tree close to the boat jetty and found a large nest with three Whitenecked Storks in it. To be precise, only two birds were in the nest. The third stood a few feet away from the nest, on the same branch, as though it had been sent to Coventry. I visited the nest thrice, and passed under it on two other occasions, but every time three identical-looking, full-grown birds were seen there. The only other Whitenecked Stork seen was an adult which stood on top of a tall stump in the lake some two furlongs away from the nest-tree. Mr. Parameswaran, one of the Asst. Wild Life Preservation Officers, told me that there were seven adult Whitenecked Storks in the Sanctuary though this was the only nest known to him. It appears that the Storks nest in this bombax tree year after year though last year for some inexplicable reason they failed to do so.

Incidentally, Parameswaran has taken great pains to familiarise himself with the local birds, and he should prove of immense help to any bird-watcher who visits Thekkady.

On the 30th, at about 7.30 A.M., the two birds in the nest were seen spreading their wings and leaping vertically over and over again, obviously as a preliminary to leaving the nest.

Darters are said to be breeding in certain less frequented parts of the lake. The few Darters I saw were all adults.

The only birds which were clearly breeding were Jungle and Whiteheaded Mynas. The former had numerous nests all of which seemed to hold clamorous young. Two pairs of the Whiteheaded species were seen entering holes in dead stumps in the lake.

Last year, early in April, I found most Racket-tailed Drongos with only one streamer; this year, however, every Racket-Tailed Drongo seen had both streamers in excellent condition. Last April I failed to see the Crimsonthroated Barbet; this year it was one of the first birds to be seen well. But, judging from the calls, there seemed to be only one pair of these birds here.

Given below is a complete list of the birds noted on this visit:-

1. Jungle Crow.
2. Southern Tree Pie. Not seen by me last April; this year conspicuous.
3. Yellowcheeked Tit. Only twice, and at one place alone.
4. Velvetfronted Nuthatch. Parties.
5. Jungle Babbler.
6. Scimitar Babbler. Only heard.
7. Yellowbrowed Bulbul. Number surprisingly small.
8. Redwhiskered Bulbul.
9. Pied Bushchat. On the Vandiperiyar-Pamba road.
10. Blackbird. Only one seen.
11. Whistling Thrush. Noisy in the morning. Pairs in trenches.
12. Blacknaped Flycatcher. Pamba road.
13. Brown Shrike. Seen here and there, all over the place.
14. Malabar Woodshrike. Only in mixed hunting parties.
15. Orange Minivet. Pairs as well as parties.
16. Ashy Swallow-Shrike. Number very small. Last April one per dead tree!
17. Bronzed Drongo(?) 2 or 3 in the company of Racket-tailed Drongos; tiny, and uttering various loud, melodious notes. Could only have been Bronzed Drongos.
18. Racket-tailed Drongo.
19. Southern Grackle.
20. Whiteheaded (Blyth's) Myna. No Greyheaded Myna seen.
21. Jungle Myna. Busy feeding young in nest.
22. House Sparrow. Vandiperiyar only.
23. Pied Wagtail. Lake, near Dam. No Grey Wagtail seen.
24. Pipit. 2 pairs near water (Sp?)
25. Small Yellownaped Woodpecker. 1 pair only.
26. Malabar Goldenbacked Woodpecker. Often.
27. Threetoed " " "
28. Malherbe's " " "
29. Small Green Barbet.
30. Crimsonthroated Barbet.
31. Hawk Cuckoo. Heard.
32. Southern Crow-Pheasant.
33. Bluewinged Parrakeet. No Blossomheaded seen!
34. Lorikeet.
35. Chestnutheaded Bee-eater. Pamba road.
36. Pied Kingfisher. Lake, near Dam.
37. Common Kingfisher(?). One only, Lake.
38. Whitebreasted Kingfisher.
39. Great Hornbill. Pamba road. One bird only, but excellent close view of bird in flight from above!
40. Indian Roller.
41. Malabar Grey Hornbill.
42. Nightjar (sp?). One 'large', silent nightjar hawking insects over leaf canopy near Aranya Nivas at about 6.30 P.M.
43. Jungle Owlet. Seen, not heard.
44. Vulture (Whitebacked?). One far off.
45. Brahminy Kite. One, adult, close to Aranya Nivas.
46. Blackwinged Kite. Pamba road.
47. Crested Honey Buzzard(?). A dark grey, bird of prey with a naked-looking, small, ash-grey head and neck, and full, rounded tail barred.
48. Jerdon's Imperial Pigeon. Pairs. Common.
49. Spotted Dove(?). Volplaning at edge of forest.
50. Grey Jungle Fowl. Heard.
51. Common Sandpiper. Singly at three places.
52. Darter.
53. Whitenecked Stork.

54. Grey Heron. One bird only.
55. Little Egret. Small number.
56. Pond Heron. Beginning to assume breeding plumage.

* * * * *

BIRDS OF RAJASTHAN

By

Zafar Futehally.

On the 19th December 1963 we arrived by car at the lake-studded, hill-girded city of Udaipur. The view of Fateh Sagar Lake from the Anand Bhavan circuit house was even more splendid than one had expected. The marshy edge of the lake, and the hills coming down on the west to the water's edge suggested that it would be a good place for birds. I did not know how good it would be until I went for a walk there in the evening.

The hotel garden itself contained a variety of birds. A neem tree was swarming with White-eyes. The birds hung on to the trees in all sorts of acrobatic positions, and no insect however much it wanted to survive could have escaped the efficient inspection of these birds. These White-eyes kept up a sweet soft chorus the whole time. On a telegraph pole some distance away there was a bird of prey. In the very strong afternoon light it was difficult to make out the colours, but from the general shape it looked like a White-eyed Buzzard. It had yellow legs all right, though I could not see the white eye. But few other diurnal birds sit so patiently for food to appear within hopping distance. Overhead a King Vulture was circling its white thigh patches clearly visible against a blue sky. There were two birds of prey with broad wings showing black and white bands from underneath. They looked like buzzards, but I would not like to hazard a guess of the species. There were a large number of scavenger vultures, circling overhead with kites, and whitebacked vultures. A loud raucous voice announced the presence of the Tree-pie on a dimru tree. A Yellowcheeked Tit was intent like the White-eyes on scouring every nook and corner of the tree for insects.

In the evening we strolled along the bund on the west of Fateh Sagar Lake, and the quantity of bird life was quite startling. There were a large number of Large Pied Wagtails looking very attractive in their neat black and white tunics. Their calls had a slightly more musical quality than twitterings of most wagtails. These birds are found in West Pakistan and India. Grey Partridges could be heard frequently calling from the scrub-covered hillsides. Two of them flew up at our approach. In Rajasthan we have both the Grey and the Painted Partridges, but no Black Partridge.

Overhanging the water was a babul tree and just a foot above the level of the lake was a branch which seemed to be the favourite perch of a Whitebrowed Frantail Flycatcher. It hawked insects above the water and returned to this perch every time. According to the books this bird is found all over India, but in Bombay one sees the Whitespotted variety much more frequently. Not far from here on the telegraph wire there was a pair of Pied Kingfishers. Most kingfishers are handsome by virtue of their colours. But they are not always very shapely birds, as the bill is disproportionately long. These Pied Kingfishers though comparatively sober coloured are nevertheless very handsome birds. When they hover in the air over a prospective meal, they make an unforgettable picture. About 50 yards away from where they were perched I noticed the little mound covered with the white of bird droppings. And before I could speculate further one of the kingfishers came and sat on the mound. A short distance away from this place was a mud wall with a small branch of a shrub sticking out. This too was covered with

droppings. Almost next to it was a round hole which I presumed was the nest. It was surrounded by a puddle of water, so I couldn't go too near. But the birds sensing my interest in their affairs got very agitated. Both of them started to call loudly and twisted and turned on the telegraph wire until I moved away. The nesting season is between October and May and both the parents share the domestic duties. This species is found almost all over India in one form or another.

There were several Whitebreasted Kingfishers around the lake, screaming away from time to time. Towards sunset a large flock of common green bee-eaters, Dusky Crag Martins and Swallows arrived on the scene. A few of the swallows looked very much whiter from underneath than the others, and when they passed overhead I noticed the wires on their tails. These wiretailed swallows are also a little larger than the Common Swallows and they have a louder call - chek, chek. On the bushes there were Purple Sunbirds in their non-breeding plumage. They looked brown and yellow with a dark throat stripe and there was nothing purple about them. There were Ashy Wren Warblers, the Rufousbellied Babbler, Blue Jays, Roseringed Parakeets, Large Grey Babblers, Cattle Egrets, Little Egret, Spotted Owlets, Redwattled Lapwing, Rosy Pastors, Scarlet Minivets, Brahminy Mynas, Indian Robin, Marshall's Iora, Common Whitethroat. Though I did not see the bird the sharp calls revealed the presence of Blyth's Reedwarbler.

As the sun went down and the birds started to make for the roosts, I noticed the solitary night heron sitting knee-deep in water under a babul tree. What was more exciting was the hovering form of a blackwinged kite on a hillside. The bird hovered for a minute or so, then descended perpendicularly with wings held above the body. It seemed to have missed its mark for there was nothing in its claws when it came into view again. The hovering and descent is always a sight that one remembers with joy. The last time that I saw this bird hovering was in the Rann of Kutch, though subsequently I did see two stationary models in the Aarey Milk Colony at Bombay.

* * * * *

AUSTRALIA'S LYREBIRDS

Courtesy Australian High Commission,
New Delhi.

Australian lyrebirds are unique in appearance and behaviour. Bird-lovers travel many thousands of miles to observe their brilliant, rainbow displays and dancing and listen to their clever mimicry.

For some time after the birds were first discovered, they were considered to resemble a certain kind of pheasant. Now they are included among the perching birds in a distinct suborder, MENURAE.

There are two species: the superb lyrebird found from Melbourne all along the Great Dividing Range to south-east Queensland and Prince Albert's lyrebird, restricted to rain-forests near the east junction of Queensland and New South Wales.

The male superb lyrebird is about as big as a domestic hen, with a grey-brown head, bright rufous-coloured wings, and a long, decorative tail. There are two beautiful lyre feathers about 30 in. long and 1½ in. wide in shades of silver-mauve, with crescent-shaped golden-brown markings, black at the curved tip; two wire-like plumed feathers of brown-grey and 12 filamentary feathers. These are grey-white in repose but when flashed above the lyrebird's head refract and reflect the light in a shower of glowing, soft colour.

Lyrebirds have powerful feet and very strong claws, well adapted for raking and sifting the earth as they seek the worms, small insects, land crustaceans and small land molluses which make up their food. The wings are short and occasionally used in normal flight, but most of the lyrebirds' aerial movements consist of flying jumps among trees and rocks, and skimming down hillsides.

For many years the shape of the lyrebird's nest remained a mystery to bird-lovers but in 1846, a Gippsland track-blazer, Mr. G.H. Haydon, accurately described the large dome-like structure.

The breeding season for both species of lyrebird extends from late autumn to early spring, and the female does all the work of building the nest, brooding, and feeding the nestling. The nest is built chiefly of sticks skilfully and ferns. The chamber is sufficiently large for the nestling to stand erect; and the floor is lined with feathers plucked by the mother-bird from her own flanks. It is not unusual for the lyrebird to build a 'nest-platform' or 'cradle-nest', which serves as the basis for a nest later.

Nests in Victoria are usually built at the base of large trees or stumps; and in the Sydney area on the ledges of sandstone cliffs. In the granite belt of north New South Wales and south-east Queensland they are often balanced precariously on the smooth ledges of huge boulders. Occasionally a nest is placed high in a large tree; one was found in Sherbrooke Forest, Victoria about 80 ft. from the ground.

The egg may be laid any time between the end of May and early August. After it is laid, it is neglected for several days before incubation begins. The incubation period averages six weeks (in cold regions it is longer), and the chick is in the nest for the same period. Altogether nesting activities occupy the mother-bird for about four months.

The chick at birth is a sightless gollywog clothed in black fluff. On the whole the lyrebird is untroubled by natural enemies, but the chick is well guarded by the mother, who becomes very aggressive when aroused. Even the fledgling can produce an ear-splitting shriek.

The male lyrebird displays and sings throughout the year except when moulting but only in the courting and breeding season does he produce the 'recitals' that have become world-famous.

Sometimes the bird will display on a log or tree-branch, but on other occasions he builds a special platform or circular clearing in the bracken about 3 ft. in diameter, with the soft earth slightly built up.

Apart from its beauty in display, the lyrebird has little trouble in imitating the screech of cockatoos, the 'laughter' of kookaburras, the lisp of robins and the chirping of other small birds.

The female birds are very good mimics, if less declamatory and constant than their mates.

Careful analysis has revealed that a lyrebird may render at a single concert as many as 40 different calls.

Before 1920, it appeared likely that the Australian lyrebird might disappear. Large numbers were being slaughtered for their feathers, which sold in Melbourne at from 2s. 6d. to £1. 10s. a pair. A strong publicity campaign made bird-lovers aware of the damage that was being done, however, and legal protection was introduced.

The Albert lyrebird - the second species of lyrebird - has a less ornamental tail than its relative and has never been severely persecuted; but because its range is very restricted - only about 150 miles in depth and 60 miles in width - clearing has had a relatively serious effect. The bird still frequents rain-forests from the Richmond River, New South Wales, in the south to Tambourine Mountain and the Blackall Range, Queensland, in the north.

Lyrebirds are generally observed singly, but often in pairs. Their call is a resounding choo! choo! choo! usually uttered at daybreak, or as a prelude to a bush-bird concert.

During the day, the lyrebird spends its time on the ground scratching among the fallen leaves and debris, or tearing rotten logs in search of food. At night it roosts high in the branches of tall trees.

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WHITECOLLARED KINGFISHER, Halcyon chloris

By

Mr. J.N. McKelvie

British High Commission, Calcutta

On 12 May 1965 my wife and I noticed an unusual kingfisher in the Botanical Gardens, Calcutta. About the same size as the Whitebreasted species, it was seen about 20 ft. above the ground, perched on a rather bare branch. It flew to another tree some yards away, then back again to the first, then again to the other tree.

Though I had once seen Halcyon chloris humii on the East Coast of Malaysia, I am indebted to my friend Dr. B. Biswas of the Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta, for confirmation that the Whitecollared Kingfisher is found in these parts. The back, wings and tail were of a greenish blue which somewhat resembled a verditer blue; the throat, breast and rest of the underparts were white, and there was a white collar right round the back of the neck. The beak seemed bi-coloured, the upper part appearing darker and the lower part rather more fleshy in colour -- as seen from below. There was a black line behind the eye and a white marking in front of the eye. The bird uttered no call.

I understand from Dr. B. Biswas that this species may be met with South of Calcutta, e.g. at Diamond Harbour, but is rarely seen in Calcutta itself. The white marking in front of the eye resembles that of the Forest Kingfisher (Halcyon macleayi) of Australia which I saw on 14.11.55 near Calcutta. Indeed the illustration of the Australian species in Neville Cayley's WHAT BIRD IS THAT? approximates very closely to the Whitecollared species.

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REVIEW

SOME INDIAN WEAVER BIRDS. By V.C. Ambedkar. pp. 72 with one black and white plate. University of Bombay. Price Rs5.

More than 30 years ago Salim Ali did a piece of field work which was perhaps his first major original contribution to Indian Ornithology. He studied the breeding and nesting habits of the Indian Weaver Bird, and discovered those amazing facts about their breeding biology which are by now common knowledge among all birdwatchers here.

While searching for a subject for this M.Sc. thesis, V.C. Ambedkar decided to carry forward the same study and include other weavers in it. The dimorphism among the weavers and the fact that they nest in colonies in open accessible places which are comparatively easy to keep under observation, were factors which helped Mr. Ambedkar in his work. For the

rest, it still took over 4 years of patient and careful work to prepare this near-complete account of the breeding biology of the weaver birds. The Common Baya was the particular species which was studied in great detail, but short accounts of the reproductive behaviour of the other 3 weavers are given in the last chapter.

In the four years' period of his intense study, Mr. Ambedkar naturally collected a vast amount of data. The presentation of this material is arranged with admirable clarity and simplicity. The thesis now published is extremely useful not only because it gives an accurate and detailed description of the life history of the baya; it will also serve as a guide and model for those birdwatchers who wish to carry out a specialized study of any particular species.

L.F.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Destruction of Crows

Prominent naturalists have been writing on the subject about the desirability of limiting the crow population of this country in the interest of allowing more pleasing birds to multiply about cities. Mr. M. Krishnan (The Times of India, 4 July 1965) writes on the same subject. He said that during the past few years he has noticed an increase in the proportion of Jungle Crows in cities. The Jungle Crow is even a greater menace -- if such a thing were possible -- than the House Crow. All bird lovers must get together to check this population explosion among crows. One simple remedy suggested by Mr. Krishnan can be put into immediate effect, if we are less liberal in throwing out kitchen refuse in the open, one of the strongest incentives for the crows to remain in close proximity with us will be destroyed.

CORRESPONDENCE

'Little Egret (Egretta garzetta) breeding in Kerala'

Reference the note from Mr. Nanu Nair; May 1965 issue of the Newsletter.

The title of the piece is misleading. The presence of birds in breeding plumage is not evidence of breeding in the locality where they are found, especially when they happen to be birds capable of long and sustained flight. Walayar is on the Kerala-Madras border and there is every possibility of the egrets building nests miles away from Walayar, in Madras State. I have records of Little Egrets with nuchal crests dating from 1943, but so far I have not heard of any place in Kerala where these birds nest. Similarly, just when the monsoon breaks, one comes across larger numbers of Cattle Egrets in various phases of breeding plumage in Palghat District, Alwaye and Trivandrum; but the only place where I have seen nests is Kunisseri in Alatur Taluk, Palghat District. This was more than 20 years ago.

K.K. Neelakantan

Trivandrum, 22 May 1965.

* * * * *

Birdwatching near a solitary tree

In front of my house across the road is a giant peepal tree. It stands like an ancient monument gasping for breath. Its trunk is half rotten and

eaten up due to old age but its branches appear solid and the crop of leaves and buds look new, verdent and have a shine of rejuvenated brightness. On Sundays and on holidays I watch its avian visitors from my perch on the verandah.

Morning visitors are the parakeets, coppersmiths with their incessant hammerings, koels, bulbuls, a pair of golden orioles and some Brahminy Mynas. But in the evenings the gathering starts. The first to arrive are a pair of vultures. They come and perch on one side and keep on flapping their unwieldy wings. Then the mynas arrive, at least about a hundred of them and drown every other noise with their continuous noisy quarreling. They try to usurp every available space with callous indifference to anybody's feeling. The next on the list are the Blue Rock Pigeons, about 20 of them. They quietly settle down in one corner and innocently watch the commotion created by the mynas. A few crows also butt in and join this wild chorus. A pair of koel then arrive and flit from branch to branch sheepishly and afraid of the din. A solitary green pigeon is the last arrival before the shades of the evening close in, leaving the world into the darkness and unto me.

Major A. David

Delhi; 6. April, 1965.

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Bengal Florican in the Kaziranga Sanctuary

Thank you so much for your letter clearing up the mystery of the Kaziranga Birds. I have read Whistler's description of the Bengal Florican and feel now that I must agree with Salim Ali! I did think of Floricans before since we saw them when we first visited the Manas Sanctuary some five years ago. In Kaziranga I got the impression of larger birds and was also impressed by the peculiar effect of a cowl -- however, in the poor light imagination could so easily run riot!

..... The extracts from the old issues of the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society give strength to Salim Ali's identification and my determination to seize the very next opportunity.

Mrs. Maureen Thom

Gauhati, April 1965.

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