

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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BIRDPWATCHERS

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FROM A TRAIN

By

K.S. Iavkumar

I remember the thrill of travelling by rail which I used to experience as a boy. The excitement of the bustle, of the changing scene outside the window, the new faces at the station, all excited my childish wonder and even today this thrill has not left me, though I have to make a conscious effort to produce the susceptible mood. Of course now I am more aware of the smoke and dust and all the irksome discomforts with which people revile the railways; but then this awareness is not a gain - I simply recognise it as a sign of middle age insidiously creeping into my system. However I am lucky in that I can still switch on to the excitement of seeing the country outside and marvelling at the sights of nature. The world has not lost its wonders, and with increased knowledge I am all the more appreciative of the manifestations of nature's wondrous acts which, alas, are considered common-place and taken for granted by my fellow passengers. Thus they wilt visibly as the starch comes off their clothes and grime and dust settles in its place; while I find this inconsequential, for my mind is beyond it and out across the moving scene: the rich irrigated plots of lucern and wheat, stands of cotton, sugarcane and millet, broad grassy verges of stream beds, deeply eroded banks beyond; gnarled boughs of banyans and mangoes; the flaming scarlet of Butea and coral; dense thickets of acacia; arabica; wind scoured boulders heaped high on grassy hill slopes; clouds over blue slopes of great mountains; ditches filled with water; village wells shaded by venerable peepals, swift eddies of hot wind swirling dry leaves into the sky; camels placidly browsing alongside the track; an elephant swaying at its tether; water buffaloes wallowing in deep mud ---- the rich and variegated scene of the Indian countryside which contains the richest bird life in the world. My mind conjures up birds among these varying settings and I almost feel that I am there below the banyans and mangoes, among the wheat and the grass along the stream, and I pity my co-travellers who feel only the heat and grime and the discomfort of being cooped up in a sweltering hot compartment. It is

at moments like this that I realise the value of all the happy hours spent pursuing this apparently valueless hobby.

Recently I invented a new game which makes each rail journey one of intense anticipation. I do actual birdwatching and not in imagination alone. The only drawback is that binoculars are of little use because of the train's movement and the short time a bird remains in view, but compensation is ample in the great area covered. In this manner, it is remarkable how many different species I have been able to see, and on a long journey, an idea of the cross-section of the birdlife of the country can be gained. The slower trains are an advantage in the greater opportunity they give to identify the bird. I have watched a pair of Sarus Cranes caring for their young; and another pair solitiously standing over an egg on a heaped nest of rushes; Pied Kingfishers hovering over a lily-choked lake near Hyderabad; Whiskered Terns skimming edges of a tidal mud near Bombay, Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters rising in hundreds one early September morning from an acacia in Marwar, solitary Kashmir Rollers buoyantly flying South on their autumn migration to Africa; teeming multitudes of Warblers, and Whitethroats flying from one clump to another in the same direction as the Rollers. I have noted Indian Rollers in display on a wayside station in Gujerat and watched a migration flight of White-eyed Buzzards. In Andhra, Orioles, Hoopoes and Drongoes are very common along the tracks while palm swifts are seen in association with Toddy palms. Storks of various types, and flocks of pelicans, are a thrill as the train crosses the flat half-submerged Ehal area between Gujerat and Saurashtra and in this area I have seen numbers of Brown Shrikes, White-tailed Lapwings, Short-toed Larks and Marsh Harriers. Flocks of Rose-ringed Parakeets flying across a pink evening sky is an eternal Indian scene while crossing rivers of North India; the noise of wheels on bridge girders sets off twittering flocks of Cliff Swallows nesting beneath. San Martins are more plentiful in North India than elsewhere, though strangely enough my railroad birdwatching has revealed Rajasthan and the Western Ganga plain as more favoured by Ring Doves and Little Brown Doves. In fact the most rewarding journeys in matter of seeing birds are through Rajasthan, across the Malwa plateau and the expanses of the Ganges plain. Strangely enough forest sountry seems poor for a railroad bird-watcher, possibly because visibility is cut down. Sound, of course, is not much value for this type of work and it is the eye which is most rewarding. At stations however one can hear bird calls and make a note of birdlife around while drinking scalding tea.

Sometimes a train stands outside the yard and here if the place is small, there is open country around. A stroll outside the compartment is refreshing and again one gets a better view of the birds. They are heard as well - the twittering of the Common Babblers and Purple Sunbirds, the warble of Bulbuls, the harsh chiming of warblers, the jitter of Wren Warblers or the strident call of Drongoes chasing a Bay-backed shrike for a wriggling morsel. Coppersmiths from a nearby tree are audible, as is the trr-trr-trr of a Redbreasted Flycatcher. A Great Grey Shrike sails down to grab a beetle at the front of the embankment, a Redwinged Bush Lark sits atop an Agave inflorescence sweetly singing away while a cocky Indian Robin hops close to appraise me with a shoe-button eye - the engine hoots and in the birdwatcher scrambles but not before seeing a Green Bee-eater snapping a dragonfly off a quivering reed in the ditch nearby. The train moves on and a paddy bird rises in startling white to land further into obscurity while a tall white egret stands erect and motionless, heedless of the clanging monster going by. The engine sends up great black puffs of smoke which arcs down on to the fields disturbing a trim kestrel which darts off to wheel high up above the pall - and so the bird-watcher happily continues his trip, begrimed, parched a little, tired and cramped but happy, for the grime can be washed away, a cool glass of water will slake the thirst, a night's sleep will rest the limbs, but the things he saw will always be remembered, as the poet Wordsworth did his "host of golden daffodils".

A list of birds seen from trains by the author:-

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|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Common House Crow. | 2. Indian Jungle Crow. |
| 3. Tree Pie. | 4. Grey Tit. |
| 5. Jungle Babbler. | 6. Large Grey Babbler. |
| 7. Common Babbler. | 8. Striated Babbler. |
| 9. Red-vented Bulbul. | 10. White-cheeked Bulbul. |
| 11. Pied Bush chat. | 12. Collared Bush chat. |
| 13. Desert Wheatear. | 14. Pied Wheatear. |
| 15. Redstart. | 16. Indian Robin. |
| 17. Blue Rock Thrush. | 18. Redbreasted flycatcher. |
| 19. Great Grey Shrike. | 20. Rufous-backed shrike. |
| 21. Bay-backed shrike. | 22. Black Drongc. |
| 23. Indian Wren Babbler. | 24. Golden Oriole. |
| 25. Rosy Pastor. | 26. Brahminy Mynah. |
| 27. Common Mynah. | 28. Bank Mynah. |
| 29. Pied Mynah. | 30. Baya. |
| 31. Whitethroated Munia. | 32. House Sparrow. |
| 33. Dusky Crag Martin. | 34. Common Swallow. |
| 35. Red-rumped swallow. | 36. Cliff swallow. |
| 37. Wiretailed swallow. | 38. Sand Martin. |
| 39. White Wagtail. | 40. Yellow Wagtail. |
| 41. Yellowheaded Wagtail. | 42. Pied Wagtail. |
| 43. Tawny Pipit. | 44. Crested Lark. |
| 45. Short-toed Lark. | 46. Red-winged Bush Lark. |
| 47. Ashy-crowned Finch Lark. | 48. Purple Sunbirds. |
| 49. Coppersmith. | 50. Green Barbet. |
| 51. Koel. | 52. Crow Pheasant. |
| 53. Posinged Parakeet. | 54. Alexandrine Parakeet. |
| 55. Blossom-headed parakeet. | 56. Indian Roller. |
| 57. Kashmir Roller. | 58. Green Bee-eater. |
| 59. Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. | 60. Pied Kingfisher. |
| 61. Whitebreasted Kingfisher. | 62. Common Kingfisher. |
| 63. Hoopoe. | 64. House Swift. |
| 65. Palm Swift. | 66. King Vulture. |
| 67. Whitebacked Vulture. | 68. Longbilled Vulture. |
| 69. Scavenger Vulture. | 70. Kestrel. |
| 71. White-eyed Buzzard Eagle. | 72. Tawny Eagle. |
| 73. Brahminy Eagle. | 74. Common Pariah Kite. |
| 75. Blackwinged Kite. | 76. Marsh Harrier. |
| 77. Pale Harrier. | 78. Blue Rock Pigeon. |
| 79. Red Turtle Dove. | 80. Ring Dove. |
| 81. Little Brown Dove. | 82. Peafowl. |
| 83. Grey Partridge. | 84. Painted Partridge. |
| 85. Black Partridge. | 86. Pheasant-tailed Jacana. |
| 87. Sarus Cranes. | 88. Stone Curlew. |
| 89. Red-wattled Lapwing. | 90. Yellow-wattled Lapwing. |
| 91. Whitetailed Lapwing. | 92. Terns and Gulls. |
| 93. Plovers. | 94. Sandpipers. |
| 95. Black-winged Stilts. | 96. Cormorants. |
| 97. Pelicans. | 98. Storks. |
| 99. Herons and Egrets. | 100. Bar-headed Geese. |
| 101. Ducks. | |

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BIRDS OF KANESHWAR

By

Zafar Futehally

Kankeshwar is a 700 ft. high hill a few miles to the north of Alibag. It has a temple on top where there is a jatra every year, and to aid the march of pilgrims, steps of black stone have been beautifully laid right from the bottom to the top. Masons of olden days took their duties seriously, apparently, and the large heavy stones have been cut and laid with great care. Alas the banyan trees which formed an avenue on either side of the steps during my school days are now no more. Some tortured stems remain, a pitiful sight, and the few trees which have survived the vandal's axe will soon be laid low. The D.F.O. of Alibag with whom I regularly discuss the prospects of reforesting the hill-sides has given up hope of being able to deal effectively with illicit wood cutters, with the skeleton staff at his disposal. A few years ago a large number of cashew trees were planted. Cattle do not eat cashew nut trees, and if the human population had cooperated, we would have had a fine shaded hillside by now. But not a tree survives.

However, at the very top of Kankeshwar there is a lovely thick evergreen jungle, where in season the orange-red flowers of the Ashoke tree add a lustre to the place. In this forested patch the bird life is quite different from that just a few hundred yards away where the trees have gone, and where in consequence the temperature is much higher. On the morning of the 30th of December we saw the Shama and heard it sing for a while. Spotted Babblers were in great fever and called continuously from the ground, and from bushes and trees. On one small tree I saw a young Paradise Flycatcher, with chocolate tail streamers, a Magpie Robin, a Drongo, and a Redwhiskered Bulbul, very agitated. The fact that they were all peering at the same spot suggested the presence of a snake to which they presumably wanted to draw attention. Ioras and sunbirds also contributed to the chorus. It was altogether a delightful experience to be in such beautiful surroundings and in such good company.

The red berries of the banyan tree were now in great profusion and on one tree there must have been at least fifty Redwhiskered Bubbles feeding on them. I have never seen such a congregation of bulbuls on one tree. They were beside themselves with joy and ate and sang simultaneously. There were no other birds apart from bulbuls on that tree.

Below Kankeshwar hill, there were Common Green Bee-eaters, Crested Larks, Blackbellied Finch Larks, Redrumped Swallows, Dusky Crag Martins, and a Shikra, circling overhead. I have said before, and must repeat, that this area of the Kolaba District is fascinating from the birdwatcher's point of view, and it is most encouraging that the area around Kihim, which is only a few miles away from Kankeshwar, is being permanently closed for shooting. (See, Notes and Comments.)

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AVIAN TECHNOLOGY

By

S. Seshadri

(Reproduced from The Times of India)

Machines do not seem to have a monopoly in replacing human skill. In this age of computerised automation it may seem incredible that trained birds can supplant specialised workers. Yet the pigeon has graduated from a mail-carrier into a production line inspector.

An American transistor manufacturing firm has employed pigeons on its assembly line to control quality. A bird watches the conveyor belt carrying the assembled transistors, and if it spots a defective one, pecks at a lever, which activates a mechanism for rejecting the faulty part. For its vigilance, it is rewarded with a grain of corn.

The pigeon can be trained in a variation of the Skinner Box (named after an American psychologist). This is a metal box with an observation panel and two levers. The bird learns to peck at a particular lever if the part is all right and at the other if the part is faulty.

The corn with which it is rewarded if it is correct is delivered through a hopper connected with the levers. If it is wrong, the lights go off for a time, temporarily blocking the opportunity to earn corn. This is punishment enough and the bird learns to avoid mistakes. The levers to be pecked at may be transparent to allow the bird to see through them at eye level.

Experiments have shown that the pigeon, with its very keen eyesight, can be used in the pharmaceutical industry too, for keeping watch over the production of pills, for instance. A perfect specimen of a pill, kept in a Skinner Box, helps the bird to spot faults.

(Pigeons are also doing the same job in Moscow with ball bearings. Each bird can inspect from 3000 to 4000 balls in an hour.)

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REVIEW

BIRD PORTRAITURE. By C. F. Tunnicliffe. pp. 96. 1st ed. London and New York, 1945, The Studio.

I read this book only when I first began trying to draw birds and was confused with too much advice. Mr. Tunnicliffe's full and general treatment of bird sketching and painting, then, became a welcome stepping-stone from the purpose to the realities of amateur bird portraiture.

Such a stepping stone of course can only hope to succeed if it is as practical as the subject allows it to be. The advantage (or disadvantage) of bird painting is that several factors matter besides hard talent or imagination: correct observation, for instance, and a knowledge of the anatomy of birds; which is encouraging for us talentless aspirants.

Mr. Tunnicliffe begins with a chapter entitled 'Making a Beginning' in which he deals with bird anatomy and the drawing of stuffed birds, and then goes on to drawing from life. 'As a rule, unless the bird is asleep, there is often quite lively movement... How then can we make drawings of the quick-moving bird? I know only one way, and that is to watch, and watch, and watch again. Do not attempt to draw while you have the bird in view, but try to get accurate impressions photographed in your mind, which you can set down on paper after the bird has disappeared.'

The next two chapters deal with field work and equipment. These early chapters are those necessary to a complete beginner. The author then moves into more ambitious fields -- plumage study in the different seasons, poses and action studies, colour and tone, picture-making, and so on, which can support the reader's interest later on as his drawing improves, or which can be very successfully helpful to a comparative veteran.

The style is pleasant and continuing, and several admiring exclamation marks expel a concentratedness in the writing. The author draws entirely on his ample supply of personal experiences and conclusions, and his own superb sketches and paintings (with which the book is filled) are a valuable supplement to the text.

Mr. Tunnicliffe is known in British natural history circles as the author of MY COUNTRY BOOK, now an 'established favourite', and as an expert ornithologist and bird artist. If his book reaches the inexperienced birdwatcher only to sketch new shapes quickly on the field, it is doing him an important service, for the ability should be valuable; even if the subject is not pursued as a major hobby.

* * * * * S.F. *

NOTES AND COMMENTS

From time to time we have been emphasising the importance of making individual field studies of our birds. It is good to learn that Mr. A. N. Prathapachandran has begun an ecological study of the House Crow in and around Bombay. At present it deals with daily and breeding behaviour -- it is hoped that it will be possible to extend it to economical aspects, interrelationship with other birds, and colonial behaviour. We will keep you informed about the progress of this work.

Readers will be familiar with the general, and for us in India, inspiring Teesdale protest* in Britain, the scale and intensity of which is 'quite unprecedented and arises from the feeling that much more is at stake than a single reservoir.' The incident well illustrates how important it is for conservation to go hand in hand with politics. While we are trying to create a public awareness of the need for conservation, it should be remembered that it should first take root with our government. Sustained efforts in this direction do bring results. Karnala was recently saved from being turned into an industrial area by the protests of the Bombay Natural History Society. As the network of what we call civilisation expands, there will be an increasing number of such cases and we cannot do too much along the lines of the 'Teesdale Defence'. We now learn that the Maharashtra Government is contemplating notifying Kihim* and the surrounding area**as completely closed for shooting, in view of the interesting bird life that exists here. This is another heartening example of Government responding to public (i.e. one man) pressure.

We wish all our readers a very happy New Year, and request that the annual subscription of R5/- be sent at your earliest convenience.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Field Characteristics:

Upon reading J.N. McKelvie's note under the above-mentioned heading, in the November 1966 issue of the Newsletter, I felt impelled to hasten to the defence of Whistler and his grand book.

With regard to the colour of the dark markings on the underparts of the Ashycrowned Finch-Lark (Eremopteryx grisea), although Salim Ali describes them in the 6th edition of THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS (p. 43) as being black, they are shown in the accompanying plate (Plate 22) as being very dark chocolate brown.

Stuart Baker in FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, Birds, 2nd edition, Vol. 3, p. 354, describes the coloration of the parts in question as follows:

'Lores, face, a broad supercilium to the nape, chin, throat, sides of neck, breast, abdomen and under tail coverts dark chocolate-brown, the head parts practically black; ear-coverts and cheeks white mixed with fulvous; sides of body ash-grey mixed with dark brown; axillaries and under-wing coverts deep chocolate'.

Lt. Barnes in his HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE BOMBAY PRESIDENCY describes them thus: 'a deep brown or black band from the base of bill through the eyes, continued to the occiput; chin and throat, sides of neck (extending at right angles behind the ear coverts and thus taking the form of a cross), breast and lower parts deep chocolate-brown or black...'

The truth may well be that the colour of these parts can be, as Barnes says, either deep chocolate-brown or black. The colour perhaps varies slightly as between the sexes or according to the age of the bird. In the field, of course, full allowance must be made for the false impression of colour which lights of different intensities and striking at different angles can give.

*See last Newsletter.

**See p. 4 of current issue.

As to the scantiness of what Whistler has to say about the song of the Large Pied Wagtail, I can only say that he sins in good company, for I can find very little about the song of this bird. Stuart Baker, for example, in the FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, previously mentioned, is altogether innocent of any reference to its song.

S. K. Reeves
Bookham, Surrey, England

Behaviour of a Shama:

Last May we were in Tikerpare forest bungalow. One day while we were discussing the behaviour and nature of some common birds of W. Bengal and Orissa, Mr N. Battey (who has to look after the bamboo forest of Angal as a representative of Titagargh Paper Mills) informed me of a peculiar experience with a shama.

As we were keenly interested, he accompanied us next morning to Bagmunda forest about 15 miles from our camp at Tikerpare. The distance we covered in half an hour driving and got down from the car at a place where his people were cutting bamboos and making them ready for easy transport. Thereafter walking for a few minutes, Mr Battey started whistling in a very peculiar manner. The whistling was continued for a few minutes with regular intervals. All the time we were keenly watching the situation. As there was no response from any side we left that place. And started for the next spot. After about 1 km. distance he selected a place, where his people were engaged in stacking the cut pieces of bamboo.

There from the car itself, Mr. Battey started whistling with very long note and high pitch. He repeated the call thrice and then kept quiet. Within two or three minutes we heard a similar whistling from a very distant place. The from this end he replied and got the response. Mr. Battey asked me to help him; according to his instruction I started whistling in the same manner. From this end the whistle was a long note on a comparatively low pitch. Answering whistles came from the other end all the time. All of a sudden it stopped. We waited for about four minutes, then I located a place where only the tail of a bird was visible. Mr Battey, whistled in a very decent; manner, then the bird changed its place. We heard a call; perhaps it was searching the source of whistling. I whistled very slowly and observed that it again changed the place. That bird was sitting in a place where we could see only its breast and nothing else. Next moment it flew away and after a minute came and sat on a branch without much leaves. Here we saw it clearly, the distance was only 16 metres.

H. P. Mukherjee & R.N. Mukherjee
Zoological Survey of India

Meeting of BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OF INDIA

The Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India was held at the residence of Mr Zafar Futehally at Andheri, Bombay, on Saturday, the 17th December 1966, at 5.30 p.m.

There were a large number of people present; in fact larger than at any previous meeting. This was undoubtedly due to the attraction provided by the showing of Mr. E. P. Gee's films later on.

Dr Salim Ali was elected Chairman of the meeting.

The Honorary Secretary gave a brief report about the working of the Club. He said that the problem of getting suitable material for the Newsletter still persisted and appealed to members to send in notes on their observations, clippings from the press which could form the basis of articles, book reviews, and extracts from ornithological magazines.

In view of the difficulties of getting material one of the regional editors had suggested that it might be better to produce the Newsletter every two months. The Honorary Secretary felt however that most members would prefer to get the Newsletter every month, and this feeling was endorsed by the meeting.

: 8 :

Regarding accounts, the Honorary Secretary said that the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India had to be grateful to Dynacraft Machine Co. Pvt. Ltd. for absorbing most of the expenditure in connection with the production of the Newsletter.

While this situation continued, the subscription rate would remain Rs 5/-. Persons in a position to donate more were requested to do so. (It may be mentioned that a handsome donation of Rs 100/- was received from one of the regional editors immediately after the meeting.)

It was unanimously decided that the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India would become a member of the International Council for Bird Preservation and a Friend of the International Council for Conservation of Nature.

It was unanimously decided that the present office bearers would continue in office for another year.

The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks to the Chair.

After the meeting Mr E. P. Gee who was present showed his excellent films on elephants, orchids, Manas sanctuary, and Kaziranga Sanctuary, which were greatly appreciated.

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