

NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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MY SURVEY OF THE CROW POPULATION OF
KHANDALA VILLAGE

By

Rev. A. Navarro, S.J.

Every lover of the Bombay-Poona road knows that Khandala village is situated at the top of the Khandala Ghats. For well over a quarter of a century I have been to our holiday-home fairly regularly every year. This place is called St. Xavier's Villa, which faces directly the Khandala village above mentioned. From the south of St. Xavier's Villa we have an open and imposing view of the Duke's Nose Ravine down to the plains. To the right side of it you see, as it were before your feet, what was known before 1928 and is still called today the "Old Reversing Station" Hill. From the top of this hill facing south two views greet the observer: part of the Duke's Nose Ravine to the left and a full view of the Plains of Kampoli to the right.

Now to the left of St. Xavier's Villa, as you look southward, stands Duke's Nose Hill separated by a shallow depression from the range of the Sausage Hills. Between the two hills a high-power line runs down to Khandala Hotel through St. Xavier's Villa and then onward to the top of the Reversing Station Hill right down to the plains. This then is the topography of the surroundings with St. Xavier's Villa as our point of departure for the following observations of the crow population of Khandala village. With this picture in mind it should not be difficult to the ethnologist to follow the results of my examination.

For quite a long time have I noticed on many evenings a slow but steady flock of the common House Crow (Corvus splendens) coming from somewhere and perching for long periods on the wires of the

pylons that stand along the property of the Villa and further. After a rest they went down apparently to the plains. Since this same procedure was repeated day after day, at exactly the same time and in the same leisurely manner, it aroused my curiosity. I finally decided to investigate the points that challenged me, as they might challenge any bird-lover: (1) from where were the crows coming; (2) why did they stop at St. Xavier's Villa; (3) whence were they going to?

With the assistance of some of my student-friends I set out on methodical observations of these common House Crows. Our observations would focus on the direction from where the crows were coming. We watched and watched. On the sixth day of our observations I came to the conclusion that the crows that were gathering late in the evening at St. Xavier's Villa were the same crows that had been mercifully carrying out the job of scavenging the Khandala village throughout the long day.

From the end of the Sausage Hills range, as you draw an imaginary line over the Khandala railway tract to the Poona motor road down to the edge of the Shivaji Ravine, we made the following observations. We observed that the crows from the right side of the line were flying across towards or in the direction of Lonavla, and from the left side of the line they were winging their way towards the direction of St. Xavier's Villa.

Then I visualized that we were dealing with a large flock (or colony) of crows that was attached to a definite area, viz. Khandala; thus there seemed the possibility of making a census of the crow population of Khandala village.

There was at that time a crow of Kathkaris employed in our Villa. So one evening I asked them if they knew where these House Crows were coming from and where they were going to. The first part of the question they could not answer with any certainty, but of the second part they said that the crows were going to roost in the Plains of Kampoli somewhere near the main motor road.

Therefore one more intriguing puzzle had to be solved and carefully observed, whether the crows were really roosting at the Plains of Kampoli. I was able to follow the route of this colony of crows to the spot indicated in a general way by the Kathkaris. If the exact spot could not be located, then at least the area was pinpointed.

Then in a flash I remembered that on more than one occasion I had observed several crow nests in that locality. And in my ramblings through the hills and dales of Khandala I can say with knowledge that I have never seen the House Crow breeding in Khandala, even when the breeding season coincided with my holiday there. So I am drawn to the conclusion that crows breed near their roosting grounds more often than near their feeding grounds, even when the facts seem to indicate the contrary.

Hence I was fully convinced that Khandala village was the feeding ground of this rather large colony of crows that we were closely observing and that Kampoli, and not Khandala, was their roosting field. So there remains the last and only point of our quest: to attempt and see if it is really possible to count their numbers.

Now the fact that they invariably stopped at the Villa was a clear indication that they made this Villa a sort of halting station to make sure of the proper time they intended to reach their roosting ground. The length of the line along which they used to perch must have been roughly in the vicinity of 200 yards. Late in the evening, about an hour before sunset, the first crow used to arrive at the wires. After a

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time a small flock of about 25 to 30 of them would foregather in the same place. From their antics and playfulness, they seemed in a happy mood and in no hurry to go off. They would jokingly peck at one another and indulge in a merry ring of acrobatics, springing off the wires and returning once more, till the time of departure they instinctively felt had arrived. The earlier groups would spend more time in corvine merriment and amusement, in mutual pecking and banter; the later groups quite as obviously spent less time in community fun as the sun leisurely dipped into the horizon.

The warning bell for their descent was sounded when 2 or 3 of them, presumably the more experienced of the seniors, would suddenly make a dash for the ravine; then the rest of the contingent would follow at leisurely speed. The earlier group at times enjoyed a second halt at the Reversing Station Hill. But once this movement of the crows had started in processional flotilla formation, the pylon wires were seldom seen without a corvine occupant, though that respite lasted but for a short time. The formation of these groups was never large; they arrived in small groups; at other times they would arrive in a stream of individuals following one another, but never in the follow-the-leader fashion or in Indian file. House Crows are an easy-going and leisurely class all their own.

If, at times, they did arrive in larger numbers than usual, they would break up into two or three smaller groups; they do not seem to enjoy the herd instinct or the psychological mob, but rather the small village mentality. But their departure down to the Ravine on their way to the plains of Kampoli was usually accompanied with a noisy cawing cacophony. The very latest arrivals used to fly over the Villa without stopping at all, following in the wake and along the same trail of those who had left before. From St. Xavier's Villa up to the Reversing Station Hill they usually used to fly more or less in group formation; as they advanced towards the plains, the groups would disintegrate and each individual would go homing his own way.

Hence there was ample time at our disposal to count them. After I had counted them myself for five or six days in succession, I asked some of my friends to do the same for another three days. Another party volunteered to do the counting of these crows for another three days. At the end of these three sets of counting we gathered all our readings and found that all of them tallied more or less, without any abnormal discrepancy. No party counted less than 246 crows and none more than 252. Therefore our final computation of the population of crows of Khandala village in May 1948 we could confidently fix at 250 crows!

Happy at this calculation, I now wanted to see how the reverse process would show, i.e. to observe these House Crows on their way back to their feeding grounds. And I was not a little intrigued to find that it was a different way. This is what I observed.

A little time before sunrise the first comers from the plains could be seen coming up, one after another. This time it was not a "float" upwards, but a flight decidedly faster and more decisive. What was more, they did not halt or stop anywhere, but made for their objective "as the crow flies"! Some of them came up over the Villa, while others from the Reversing Station Hill were making a bee-line for their feeding ground. The flight from their feeding ground to their roosting habitat must be roughly three miles as the crow flies.

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BIRD DOCTORING

By

S. V. Nilakanta

It was Sunday, 20th December 1964, an important day for the Field Club of Birdwatchers was having its Annual General Body Meeting. Being a Sunday morning, I happened to stroll along the Juhu beach. Looking seawards, I noticed a bird flying shorewards at right angles to the shore line. The bird was being chased by a number of crows. At first it appeared that the crows were bullying a tern into dropping its hard earned catch. As the flight of the smaller bird was very feeble and as it was dropping in altitude, I ran along the beach to intercept its line of flight and with the idea of having as close a look as possible. The bird, however, was so exhausted that it could not maintain flying speed and dropped to a height of four feet from the ground and was caught by me in mid air!

Even as I caught it, I realized that the bird was a cuckoo. It was taken home and kept under a basket and when it had rested a little was given water by force feeding. At this time an attempt was made to positively identify the bird. The first impression was to place it as the Common Hawk-Cuckoo Cuculus varius. The Common Hawk-Cuckoo, in my opinion, cannot be called at all common in the gardens of Bombay. Certainly, I had no previous experience of holding any cuckoo in the hand. On referring to various books the bird was able to answer to the descriptions of the Indian Cuckoo C. microp-terus as well as to the Cuckoo C. canorus.

Personally, I like to think that the bird was coming in from a distant land and the crows, ever ready to spot a stranger, who did not understand the locality, fell upon it. That happens to so many Pied Crested Cuckoos that come to this crow infested shore. Local birds know the ways of crows and are usually able to take care of themselves but not the tired stranger.

The bird was then left in the aviary of Capt. Bhandarkar. It soon climbed up into the more sheltered portion of a tree in the aviary. A pair of Green Munias were very greatly agitated by the presence of this 'hawk'. Although they flitted from end to end of their cage, they ever came closer and closer to the new bird and within an hour knew that it was absolutely harmless.

All efforts to feed the cuckoo resulted in failure. The feathers of the bird had lost their gloss and were thoroughly unkept. The fine markings and spots on individual feathers did not properly align to give a true barred effect. In spite of careful examination, no broken bones or external injury could be seen. The bird made no effort at any time to preen itself. As healthy birds seem to preen themselves so actively in the sun, the lack of performing this important function, may have indicated the extreme deterioration of its condition.

Next day the bird was returned to me in a smaller and comfortable cage. The bird appeared to be in a comma and died that night. Its body had wasted away to a pitiful bundle of skin and bones.

Early this September, one evening, Mr. Zafar Futehally brought me a young Gullbilled Tern. Again crows had been harrasing it. The bird appeared to be uninjured and alert although it made no effort to peck or get away from the hand. A cage was borrowed and the bird housed in it. Some water was given to the bird. Later on, an Adexolin vitamin

capsule was given. The bird always sat on the floor of the cage and held itself perfectly horizontal. Its feathers were in fine shape but it never preened them.

In the next few days the bird was fed small doses of hard boiled eggs, cod liver oil, bread, boiled rice and vitamin capsules. After two days of this the feathers on the head and throat became wet and remained wet. The next two days saw further deterioration of feather condition, after which the bird died.

In nature the bird would have been exposed to the monsoon wind and rain. Gulls and terns are also exposed to the blazing sun. Perhaps, in addition to a simulated balanced diet, I should have simulated natural environments by keeping the cage outdoors. But why did the bird not preen its feathers? Does the bird's oil gland work only when it is exposed to sunlight?

Some years ago another Gullbilled Tern was brought to me. This bird had been caught by a dog on the beach. This incident was following a storm during the previous night. This bird was practically unhurt and showed some spirit when handled. As efforts to give food and water failed, it was suggested by Capt. Bhandarkar that we should leave it in the Tulsi Lake area. We did this after the feathers were dry. Even after being released, the bird did not fly but waddled around on its legs. We stood around to keep the crows away. After a few minutes of this exercise, the bird took off slowly and flew straight to the lake. There it alighted on the very edge and drank water again and again. As soon as its thirst was quenched it preened its feathers thoroughly. It was a pity that I had not banded the bird.

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SOME MORE BIRDS IN OUR JUHU GARDEN

By

Mrs. Leela Nilakanta

Last July 1964, I had written a short note in our Newsletter about some species of birds seen in our garden. Every year some new species make an appearance and some old friends disappoint us by their absence. Every time I see a new bird in our garden, I compare notes with my friend, Mrs. Laeeq Futchally, to see if I was more favoured than she was. Thus when a crow-pheasant was observed among our trees, I felt that scores were evening out, though my bird was a raggedy specimen compared to the sleek one she had in her garden.

Little did I realize what a chain reaction was to come about with the appearance of this bird. We have numerous tailor birds in our garden and several broods have been successfully hatched. I felt that the crow-pheasant would act as a deterrent to this but as far as I could observe, this bird was only interested in hopping from branch to branch of our peepul tree. But my fears proved to be correct as there was a marked decline in the population of the tailor birds.

We have a bush of the Rangoon Creeper (Quisqualis indica) just outside our verandah. When it is cascading with flowers, it is a beautiful sight. Flowers are usually absent in the monsoon season and the leaves look damaged. This damage was caused by horrible, large caterpillars, which have been getting fewer in the last few years, due to the diligent search and destruction by our tailor birds. But this year, due to the lesser number of tailor birds about, the caterpillars have increased in number and there are fewer flowers.

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So, after all, the crow-pheasant did not prove to be a welcome addition to the bird-life of our garden and I do not regret its departure.

Not all birds are unwelcome. Early one morning, this summer, we heard a shrill piping similar to the call of sunbirds but yet different. So we investigate. We saw a fiery streak flitting into our tamarind tree. My husband identified it as a kingfisher - or though smaller than the Common Kingfisher. From the tamarind tree it went to a small garden pond in the house opposite ours. I kept close watch but never managed to catch more than a glimpse in the few days it was with us. But one evening when I was away from home, my husband was sitting in the garden with Mr. Zafar Futehally when this bird flew into a bush close to them and they were able to observe it for a long time. I am hoping that it will come again and that I will be able to see it too. It has been identified positively as a Threetoed Kingfisher, Ceyx erithacus!

In May, it being the dry season, the grass growing around Juhu aerodrome and the surrounding wet regions was burnt and this probably was the cause for a beautiful bird visiting us. One morning when I opened the back door, a bird scuttled away. It looked like a chicken and I investigated. I could not see it but I could hear it clucking. So I kept watch and finally managed to get a good look at it. I referred to Dr. Salim Ali's THE BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS, and thought that it could be a Painted Snipe. But when my husband saw it that evening, he identified it as one of the rails!

Later on it became very familiar, just like the domestic chicken I had thought it to be! In fact my cook called it in Tamil Kozhi which means a fowl! It was always moving through the hedge and along the hedge. When it was feeding just outside our kitchen window or under the peepul tree, I worried lest that the cat that was about should harm it but it seemed to be able to take good care of itself.

One of its favourite haunts was the shelter under a lantana bush. By hiding inside this bush, my husband was able to observe it from a distance of two feet. Whenever anyone approached it, it used to scurry for safety to this lantana bush. So even when he was under the bush, when I approached it, it ran for shelter to this bush. Later on my husband was able to identify it positively with the help of skins at the Bombay Natural History Society, as a Banded Crane, Rallina eurizonoides. This bird has vanished from our garden, probably on the restoration of its natural habitat, after the onset of the monsoon.

A few evenings ago, we were sitting in the garden and I was gazing skywards at all the birds flying home. Suddenly I noticed a really huge bird hovering round a coconut tree and settling on a frond of it. I had not seen such a huge bird so close to the roof-top and asked my husband to investigate. It was a Whitebacked Vulture. Quite soon, it had attracted the attention of all the crows in the neighbourhood and they came swooping close to it. One or two of them even sat on the same frond but the vulture took no notice of them. The Pariah Kite that also belongs to this neighbourhood, joined the fray now and dive-bombed it several times but to no avail.

One crow, bolder than the rest, actually sat on the back of the vulture and pecked it for what it was worth, again to no avail. The vulture edged closer to the trunk of the tree and settled down for the night. It was still there next morning and flew off only when the sun was very hot and the warm currents of air were favourable for its take-off.

Pond Herons have taken to roosting on the trees around our house. Spotted Owlets are very vociferous. Last year they had nested in the banyan tree near our house and this year, they have their nest on a topless coconut tree across the

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road. Parakeets and Mynas have an argument all day long and what with the noise they and the crows make between them, I am afraid that I will not be able to hear the call of any new visitors to our garden.

REVIEWS

THE YOUNG SPECIALIST LOOKS AT BIRDS. By Heinrich Frieling. Translated and adapted by Winwood Reade. Illustrated by E. Haferkorn, and others. pp. 122. London. Burke. Price

This book is one of a series of small, beautifully illustrated and scientifically accurate handbooks which are meant to enable the youngster to painlessly learn the fundamentals of any natural-history subject which attracts him. Among the other titles in the series; for instance, are The Young Specialist looks at the Weather, Horses, Pond-life, Wild Flowers, Molluscs. Thus a slight curiosity can, with the help of the right one of these books, be developed into a lasting hobby or even, with ambition, into a serious scientific interest.

The purpose of the volume on Birds is to help in the identification of birds, neither more nor less. It seems to me, but perhaps this only shows my ignorance, that the birds of Europe must be more difficult to identify than ours. There seems to be a high proportion of small brown birds with no distinguishing marks. If this book can teach the young birdwatchers to sort out by species the multitude of identical-looking brown birds it will have done a remarkable job. In attempting this the two-line notes on the bird's habitat and behaviour might prove to be almost as useful as the really superlative coloured illustrations. The user of this book would have to spend a half hour initially in order to familiarize himself with the Key to the Identification Tables. A truly Germanic System of numbering each species according to its characteristics and then using the numbers throughout the book is likely to scare the frivolous at first; but the earnest will no doubt find it rewarding to master the system and use it.

(L.F.)

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The International Union for Conservation of Nature meeting at Delhi in November

The Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, has invited a number of eminent naturalists of the International Union for Conservation of Nature to a seminar in New Delhi in the third week of this month. Various matters of importance connected with Wild Life Preservation and Nature Conservation in this country will be discussed, and it is hoped that this will be an important landmark in our attempt to save our vanishing wild life and protect suitable habitats from being overrun by thoughtless development.

The Newsletter hopes to report on the results of the meeting in the next issue.

CORRESPONDENCE

Roosting habits of the Coppersmith

Coppersmiths roost in holes, but it is not uncommon for them to roost like other birds on perches under a canopy of leaves. Last summer I saw a single bird roosting on a banyan twig for days together. In the same tree there were some more though I could not actually see them.

We are told that coppersmiths make a nest to rear their young ones and afterwards use it as a roost. Contrary to this arrangement on 10.vii.1965, I saw a lone bird poking out a hole in a log of wood fixed obliquely on the top of one of the several pikes that fence a yard. During the following days it completed the work and used it as a roost. Whether the same hole will be used by the same bird as a nest in the next nesting season is to be observed.

T.V. Jose

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Nest of the Tailor Bird

My father had written an account of a Topsy Turvy Nest in the Newsletter of February 1964. The nest was first seen by us in October 1963. Again a tailor bird built a nest in October 1964 but did not finish it. It remained like a hollow pipe in the almond tree.

Again this October the tailor bird has built a nest in the same almond tree. It was Topsy Turvy to start with and now the leaf has become straight. I wonder whether the bird will lay any eggs in it. The nest is 19 ft. from the ground. I measured it with a bamboo pole and then measured the pole with a tape.

There are two other tailor bird's nests in the compound which are only 5 ft. away from the ground.

Sumedha Nilakanta

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Birdwatching in British Columbia, Canada and elsewhere

I have had a most interesting and indeed wonderful summer vacation, having spent most of my time in the British Columbia coast of Canada learning about the bird life over there. On my way back to Pakistan and before the fighting erupted, I spent a few days in the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands and a whole month in Australia. I had the thrill of seeing the famous lyre bird singing and displaying as well as wild emus, large flocks of various species of cockatoos, etc. In the Solomon Islands on a remote volcanic island I had the wonderful experience of seeing a huge hatchery of Incubator Birds (Megapodes) which laid their eggs in warm volcanic ash instead of a mound of rotting vegetation, and whose eggs were regularly dug out and 'farmed' by the nearby native villages.

Tom J. Roberts

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Birdwatching in Nagaland

Nagaland is a marvellous country. Totally mountainous, with highest range, Patkoi, rising 12,000 ft. The valleys and the steeper nallahs are a mass of vegetation. Trees soar skyward, like giant pillars, holding a canopy through which the sunlight barely penetrates. Exotic climbers and orchids claw the trees in a deadly embrace. It is a sight which completely overawes a beholder. The gentler slopes and the mountain tops are shaved off of the trees as the Nagas believe in the primitive method of shifting cultivation. But here and there the fallow hillsides are covered with luxuriant high grass, ferns and shrubbery that would put to shame any garden tendered by human hand. What I am trying to get at is that bird life is rich in variety.

For the present the swifts are a constant source of wonder to me with their speed and grace of flight. Perched

on this mountain top of c. 5000 ft. I can observe the larger swifts of our sub-continent, hurtling down in the valleys and the slopes. It is fascinating watching them through the binoculars. You get a bird in the view, it twists and turns, scratches itself, ruffles its feathers to clear itself of the little raindrops, makes a gentle straight descent in the valley at a breath-taking speed, in the background the mountain slope is rushing by. Soon you feel that it has gone far for minute observation and as you take down the binoculars and see with the naked eye, you see a small dot dashing across the mountain slope thousands of feet below. Here there are mixed bands of the Whitethroated and Brownthroated Spinetail Swifts.

Pratap Singh, I.P.S.
Dy. Commandant, 4th M.P.P.
Titabar, Sibsagar Dist.
Assam

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Spotted Owlets.

Last term an orderly brought a couple of Spotted Owlets to a friend's cabin -- I don't know how he caught them. This friend sent for me.

We kept the owlets for a few days feeding them with cooked meat smuggled from the mess. We washed the meat thoroughly to rid it of oil and spices before feeding it to the birds. All this had to be done surreptitiously because we are not allowed to keep pets.

The owlets used to perch on our hands but if we bobbed them up and down they seemed to become excited for they would then screech horribly. We had to let them go after a few days.

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