

Birdwatching in the Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu (*with Brief Notes on the Altitudinal Distribution of a few Species of Birds*)

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Introduction

My wife and I had gone for a short holiday to Wellington (c. 1832m) in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu and were there from 31st July 1986 to 4th August 1986. While we were there, the skies were generally overcast and a cold breeze blew constantly. A few brief showers of rain fell almost every day. Heavy mist often reduced visibility to 50' or less. Temperatures ranged between 13°C and 19°C. We boarded and lodged at the picturesque Wellington Gymkhana Club and birded casually on long walks and drives to the various viewpoints reached from Ooty (c. 2286m) and Coonoor (c. 1859 m). Much of the habitat consisted of tea and coffee plantations, but we were able to visit some remnants of moist deciduous forest and the fringes of hillside sholas, and of course the beautiful botanical gardens in Coonoor and Ooty.

However, wherever we went, I kept notes and, on getting back to the Club when I looked up the various bird books, I realised that the maximum altitude recorded

for some of the species we had been watching was much lower than that at which we had observed them. It was then that the idea was born for this paper. An increase in altitudinal range is the same for hill/mountain birds as is an increase in distribution area for plains birds. I do not know the reason for this obvious increase in the altitudinal distribution of the few species mentioned by me here, nor do I know if this has been pointed out by other birders and, published. Guessing at reasons for the increase might not be right for birds are great wanderers and a few meters may not be out of their reach! The point is regarding the record. In the table of comparative maximum altitudinal distribution, the works I have cited and compared my notes with, have invariably dealt with different races (subspecies) of the species mentioned, found either in the highlands of north India or in the mountainous regions of Nepal. A few altitude records (like that of the hoopoe) are those on which the birds were observed on migration. Of parti-

cular interest are the records of small blue kingfisher's young and spotted munias' nesting at the various heights mentioned.

I have written short notes on some interesting observations, besides those for the species dealt with regarding increase in vertical distribution. At the end is the list of birds we saw, arranged in systematic order.

[Mammals seen were 2 Nilgiri Langurs (*Presbytis johni*) just before Ooty when coming from Gudalur and a Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) on the road from Dolphin's Nose Viewpoint to Coonoor at 7-00 p.m. on 3-8-86. That was some sight !]

NOTES

1. **Blackwinged Kite** : One bird perched on overhead wire approximately one kilometer before Dolphin's Nose Viewpoint (c. 1860m) which is reached from Coonoor. Later also seen on the Wellington-Ooty road.

2. **Red Spurfowl** : Three birds near the wildlife complex in Mudumalai Sanctuary on 30-7-1986.

3. **Grey Junglefowl** : On the Ooty-Gudalur road at c. 1800 m. on 4-8-1986.

4. **Small Blue Kingfisher** : About 8 birds on Ooty Lake were seen in the afternoon of 3-8-86 of which 4 were young birds. The breeding season according to the Handbook for the South Indian race is from February to September.

5. **Whitebreasted Kingfisher** : One bird on 31-7-1986 in the morning at Wellington, flying over the golf course—bordering which a stream flows.

6. **Chestnutheaded Bee Eater** : 3-4 birds on a hillside near Wellington, in top-storey of tall trees. Seen at eye-level from hill top.

7. **Hoopoe** : One bird beside stream in Wellington.

8. **Little Scalybellied Green Woodpecker** : One bird about a kilometer before Dolphin's Nose Viewpoint (c. 1860 m). While I was watching some babblers, it flew from the same tree, onto another across the road and landed quite low. Rump yellow, belly white, closely barred with horizontal lines. Fore-crown red. nape greyish-black ; mantle. wings, top of tail grass green. Call a shrill nasal "Preent".

9. **Common Swallow** : A few seen Lamb's Rock Viewpoint, 10

km. from Coonoor - with Nilgiri House Swallows - and so differentiated with ease.

10. Jungle Myna : The birds seen had whitish eyes which belong to the southern race "*mahrattensis*" of this species. Some birds, later confirmed as young - did not have the characteristic brush of feathers above the beak. They looked somewhat odd as the feathers of the forehead came down onto the bill, making it look extraordinarily short. They were also lighter in colour than the adults. The nesting season is chiefly February to May.

11. Pied Flycatcher - Shrike : A pair in the Botanical Gardens in Ooty (c. 2286m) on various species of pine.

12. Redwhiskered Bulbul : Common, ubiquitous, noisy.

13. Redvented Bulbul : Relatively less commoner than the former.

14. Peninsular Scimitar Babbler : Since I got up on 1-8-1986, I had been hearing this bird call, not knowing its identity. So we headed for the patch of forest behind the Wellington

Gymkhana Club and kept following the call. Then I began to imitate the call and gradually the bird came closer until I saw it clearly, high overhead. The bird raises its head to call. The call we heard had 3-4 notes in it and was followed immediately by what Dr. Salim Ali says was the female's high pitched query. We did not see her.

15. Tickell's Blue Flycatcher : Lamb's Rock, Coonoor (c. 1859 m) two birds in tea bushes. While returning from L's Rock gave me quite a time as I saw them from the car and thinking they were some other species, stopped and waited. Quite some time later I saw them. Jerky raising and lowering of tail clinched the issue of 'flycatcher'.

16. Velvetfronted Nuthatch : Seen at Wellington, Coonoor and Ooty. Common, energetic and beautiful. Feeding over the massive girthed trunks of trees in the Ooty Botanical Gardens, in a speedy, jerky sort of way, reminiscent of a clock-work toy !

17. Spotted Munia : Seen occasionally at Wellington. One pair nesting in the Ooty Botanical Gardens (c. 2286 m.)

TABLE OF COMPARATIVE MAXIMUM ALTITUDINAL DISTRIBUTION

	Species	A	BK	HB	HDB	S	BN
1	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1860	1050	—	1600	1300	1372
2	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2286	900	—	2100	1800	2287
3	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	1832	1500	—	2000	2000	2745
4	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>	1832	1050	—	1500	1000	1677
5	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1832	1500	—	1700	1700	5795
6	<i>Picus myrmecophoneus</i>	1860	1200	—	1800	1700	305
7	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1860	*	2121	—	—	1830
8	<i>Hemipus picatus</i>	2286	1050	—	1500	—	1830
9	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>	2286	1050	—	1800	1800	457
10	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	1832	1050	909	1500	1800	2135
11	<i>Muscicapa tickelliae</i>	1860	1500	—	1500	1500	305
12	<i>Sitta frontalis</i>	2286	2400	1818	2200	2200	2013
13	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>	2286	2150	—	2100	2100	1525

* - 'Low country'

Legend

A	- Author
BK	- Birds of Kerala
HB	- Indian Hill Birds
HDB	- Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan
S	- A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan
BN	- Birds of Nepal

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRDS SEEN BETWEEN
31-7-1986 & 4-8-1986

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|---|----------------------------------------------------------|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Blackwinged Kite
(<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>) | 6 | Small Blue Kingfisher
(<i>Alcedo atthis</i>) |
| 2 | Red Spurfowl
(<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>) | 7 | Whitebreasted Kingfisher
(<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>) |
| 3 | Grey Junglefowl
(<i>Gallus sonneratti</i>) | 8 | Chestnutheaded Bee Eater
(<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>) |
| 4 | Blue Rock Pigeon
(<i>Columba livia</i>) | 9 | Hoopoe (<i>Upupa epops</i>) |
| 5 | Spotted Dove
(<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>) | 10 | Small Green Barbet
(<i>Megalaima viridis</i>) |

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|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 11 Little Scalybellied Green Woodpecker
(<i>Picus myrmecophoneus</i>) | 28 Brown Flycatcher
(<i>Muscicapa latirostris</i>) |
| 12 Dusky Crag Martin
(<i>Hirundo concolor</i>) | 29 Tickell's Blue Flycatcher
(<i>Muscicapa tickelliae</i>) |
| 13 Common Swallow
(<i>Hirundo rustica</i>) | 30 Nilgiri Flycatcher
(<i>Muscicapa albicaudata</i>) |
| 14 House Swallow
(<i>Hirundo tahitica</i>) | 31 Greyheaded Flycatcher
(<i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i>) |
| 15 Rufousbacked Shrike
(<i>Lanius schach</i>) | 32 Whitespotted Fantail Flycatcher
(<i>Rhipidura albicollis (albogularis)</i>) |
| 16 Common Myna
(<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>) | 33 Ashy Wren Warbler
(<i>Prinia socialis</i>) |
| 17 Jungle Myna
(<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>) | 34 Magpie Robin
(<i>Copsychus saularis</i>) |
| 18 House Crow
(<i>Corvus splendens</i>) | 35 Pied Bushchat
(<i>Saxicola caprata</i>) |
| 19 Jungle Crow
(<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>) | 36 Malabar Whistling Thrush
(<i>Myiophonus horsfieldii</i>) |
| 20 Pied Flycatcher-Shrike
(<i>Hemipus picatus</i>) | 37 Grey Tit (<i>Parus major</i>) |
| 21 Redwhiskered Bulbul
(<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>) | 38 Velvetfronted Nuthatch
(<i>Sitta frontalis</i>) |
| 22 Redvented Bulbul
(<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>) | 39 Nilgiri Flowerpecker
(<i>Dicaeum concolor</i>) |
| 23 Black Bulbul
(<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>) | 40 Small Sunbird
(<i>Nectarinia nima</i>) |
| 24 Peninsular Scimitar Babbler
(<i>Pomatorhinus horsfieldii</i>) | 41 Purple Sunbird
(<i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>) |
| 25 Rufous Babbler
(<i>Turdoides subrufus</i>) | 42 White Eye
(<i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>) |
| 26 Jungle Babbler
(<i>Turdoides striatus</i>) | 43 House Sparrow
(<i>Passer domesticus</i>) |
| 27 Nilgiri Laughing Thrush
(<i>Garrulax cachinnans</i>) | 44 Spotted Munia
(<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>) |
| | Unidentified : <i>An accipiter and a night jar.</i> |

References :

Ali, Salim (1984) : The Birds of Kerala. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press.

Ali, Salim (1979) : Indian Hill Birds, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press.

Ali, Salim & Ripley, S. D. (1983) : Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan, Compact edition, Oxford University Press.

Fleming, R. L., et. al. (1970) : Birds of Nepal, 2nd edition, Avalok Publishers.

Ripley, S. D. (1982) : A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan, 2nd edition, Bombay Natural History Society.

[The Black^wringed Kite has been recorded on the Dodabetta hill (Nilgiris) C. 2670 m (*Newsletter For Birdwatchers* : XIX : No. 7 Page 10). It has also been recorded at the Elk Hill (8090'), neighbouring Dodabetta on several occasions and is believed to be fairly common in those parts (*ibid* XIX : No. 8 page 13).

— EDITORS

Communication in Plants

A fascinating aspect of dynamic plant defense recently came to light when researchers discovered elevated levels of defensive chemicals, not only in the leaves of willow trees defoliated by tent caterpillars, but in adjacent un-attacked trees as well. Carefully controlled laboratory experiments seem to confirm that trees can communicate the presence of feeding insects to other nearby

trees. Although the mode of communication is unknown, plants have long been known to produce the highly volatile compound ethylene in wounded tissues. One is tempted to speculate that ethylene acts as the messenger that informs nearby tissues to begin defensive metabolism and that the diffusion of ethylene into the atmosphere may trigger similar processes in nearby trees.

Courtesy : (Forest Insects)