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FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

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A MADRAS NUMBER



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MORE NOTES FROM MADRAS

By

R.A. Stewart Melliush

In March's Newsletter I invited readers to cast an ornithological glance at the south-eastern seaboard of India, which had been largely ignored by recent birdwatchers' literature. Six months have passed since then, so I hope I can repeat the invitation now without importunacy. The rigmarole that follows is about Lake Pulicat.

This is a brackish lagoon on the Coromandel Coast a little north of Madras city, now lying partly in Madras State and partly in the Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. It is separated from the sea on the east by a long strip of land called Sriharikota Island, along the western edge of which runs the Buckingham Canal. The sea flows in through a narrow breach in the coast at the southern tip of Sriharikota, and there is probably another inlet to the north of it near Durgarajupatnam. The lagoon itself is roughly 23 miles long from north to south and 13 miles wide at its widest point -- big enough to be marked fairly distinctly on most small-scale maps of India of the type that appear in popular atlases of the world. So when six years ago I first knew I was to be posted to Madras, then nothing more to me than the name of a remote East India Company factory severely denigrated by William Hickey, I resolved that on my arrival I should waste no time before exploring what was obviously the only important topographical feature of the coast near the city and a place that was very likely to be of interest to a birdwatcher. I was not disappointed: if it has yielded little of excitement in the way of breeding birds, it sports a comprehensive selection of winter migrants, some of which linger on through the summer months, and is much the most rewarding spot to visit regularly anywhere in the neighbourhood.

Apart from its birds, moreover, it is a place with a decided character of its own which grows on one as little by little it reveals the secrets of the different worlds it contains. It has plenty to offer the marine biologist; and the amateur, if not the professional, botanist; it has boats, and a small boat-building industry, and techniques of fishing to study; the village of Pulicat moreover has a mercantile history of no little interest. This is not the place to digress on these topics; but I wish it were, and I cannot avoid one illustration. Pulicat village, at the southern extremity of the lagoon where the sea gushes in between spits of sand, is a decayed port, with an ineffectual earthwork and moat built and once occupied by Dutchmen. To one looking now at that pitiful little rectangle of turf dotted with bellyache bushes and Madagascar periwinkle, the notion is absurd. How improbable they

seem, those stolid Protestant burghers in black hats packing up and down clinking guilders in their pockets, and running their thick thumbs down bills of lading! They have left little behind them: the vague shape of the fort; a cemetery, full of obelisks and cracked pavilions and slabs of stone sculptured with their names which women now smack wet saris on; and a memory of wealthy, better days among the Muslims they traded with, and who still live today in the ruins of once prosperous town houses. Their columniated verandas are now open to the rains, in streets that evoke recollections of Herculaneum and Pompeii. But when a place has a past, however vague its present traces, it is the owner of a personality and a dignity that the vast mass of anonymous South Indian villages and towns utterly lack.

The lake's most conspicuous delight for the birdwatcher is sufficiently exoteric for even the layman to enjoy: this is the groups of flamingo whose presence somewhere on the lake can be almost guaranteed at any time of the year, winter or summer. It is true that even in winter, when the numbers are greater, the shallows in which they congregate extend so far that it is easy to miss them by inspecting the wrong part of the lake, or by not staying there long enough, and so go away disappointed, but the only months of the year that I have not recorded flamingo there are March and August, and this means very little, for I have many records for February and at least one for March, and I have never been to the lake in August. The signs are that the species, Phoenicopterus roseus, is represented all the year round by small parties of non-breeding birds -- some are clearly immature, having grey beaks and plumage -- and that these are regularly joined in the winter by migrants from the Rann of Kutch or some other perhaps unknown Asiatic breeding-colony. I have never seen more than a thousand birds, but never less than eighty or a hundred. In the winter when it is wet they are extremely mobile, either because their food and suitable shallows to feed in are more widely dispersed or because their familiar haunts are no longer shallow enough for them, and they can be seen outside the immediate vicinity of the lake. Indeed, all the way along the coast both to the north and to the south of Madras there are shallow brackish and salt lagoons just behind the shore and some of these occasionally attract flamingo, though I have yet to meet anyone else who has ever noticed them. I have seen them at Mahabalipuram, flying about near the PWD bungalow, and within two hundred yards of the main road from Madras to Mahabalipuram, near Kelambakkam.

Everything is slightly unreal about a day when flamingoes are seen. In their branch of creation they are the ultimate absurdity, like stick-insects in theirs. They belong to the world of mock turtles, dodos, and the Queen of Hearts' exotic game of croquet. It is not however the flamingoes which make one return again to the lake, in all weathers, to plod through its gluey shallows in the horizontal rains of November or to sail out to its remoter sand-dunes under a sun, as the heralds called it, 'in its splendour'. Its primary and abiding interest lies in its being a convenient kind of enclosure or frame within which it is feasible to build up a coherent picture of the population and movements of the water-birds of south-eastern India. No such picture can be obtained by sporadic examinations of scattered waters and random strips of coast, useful though these undoubtedly are, and often spectacular. In the long run there is no substitute for the painstaking, methodical working of a manageable area with which one can become, in time and with patience, really familiar. I have not worked Pulicat either painstakingly or methodically, far from it, but I am sure the aim of

of so doing is a sound one to have in view and if every bird-watcher in India set about the study of the birds of a clearly defined area of country, even if it was only his back garden, and eventually published his conclusions in a bulletin like the Newsletter, we should all begin to know a little bit more about the wild life of this country.

Now that I have reached this sententious climax, the proper proceeding is for me to regurgitate an indigestible list of the species I have seen at Pulicat, with earnest little comments on them. 'Commonly met with in small parties of 20-30 on saltings off Annamalaichcheri, October-March.' This approach to ornithological writing is often necessary and wholly justified, but as this article is not a systematic report I shall not adopt it here. Something less formal is called for. To achieve this, I propose to give a narrative account of what is to be seen on a typical passage up the middle of the lake. We shall take a small dinghy out from Pulicat village, and sail upon its waters.

North of the village is a bulge of land, where grey and golden plover and occasionally yellow-wattled lapwing appear in winter, and north of this again, the channel running in from the sea. It is from this point on the southern shore that we embark to run up the lagoon. Over the channel I have often seen a pair of white-bellied sea-eagles, and imagine their preference for this part of the lake is the concentration of fish which must here pass through a narrow bottleneck. A fortnight ago I visited a little islet near the sea end of the channel, to which these eagles often appear to fly, hoping I might find their nest in a cluster of trees there. I was disappointed: the trees were small and unsuitable: yellow-wattled lapwing were the only birds breeding there; but there were four sea-snake skeletons there which suggested that some large bird or birds had used the island as a secluded spot for a meal. In the winter another bird which can generally be seen gorging itself on the banks of this channel is the osprey, which is a fine bird to see commonly.

Heading north-west we pass up the narrow southern finger of the lake towards more open water. It is shoally, and large stretches of water are only ankle deep, but there is a deeper channel close in to Sriharikota and we make good progress. We soon draw near two stones sticking vertically out of the water a yard apart. As for the next three or four hours' sailing these are the firmest and steadiest objects we shall find we moor alongside one and clamber out. The water here is waist-deep and the stones are just the right height to prop a telescope on. We can thus examine at leisure the many birds assembled in groups and dotted about in the shallows. Fortunately it is morning and they are down sun of us. In the evening everything on the mud will be in black silhouette and barely discernible. Quite near, and entirely unconcerned at our approach, are the lagoon's familiar occupants: flamingoes, a few painted storks (rarely are there many of these -- fifty or sixty is the most I have ever seen together), egrets, the odd reef heron in its 'ashy-grey' plumage, grey herons and some pelicans. With luck, for they are not altogether common, a row of spoonbill. Once, last October, to my intense delight, when I was walking out towards these storks after a young flamingo with a broken leg, somebody let off a bang, a gun I suppose; and among the multitude of far-off birds which rose in alarm and filled the sky above Masumani Lock with their wings I noticed ten birds in a close group that fluttered off like butterflies, white with black wingtips. They were avocets. These delicately built and extremely graceful birds seem to be decidedly uncommon in the south of India. I have only seen them this once near Madras and once near Vijayawada. Last October's birds did not stay at Pulicat for the winter: my notes go on, 'eventually a row of rowdy fisher-women put them up, and they flew most beautifully and purposefully to the east, as if

they would not come back.' This was on the 15th. I was paddling in the lake again on the 17th and the 18th and no avocets were to be seen.

The terns I mentioned are also familiars. Gullbilled, whisker-ed, and Caspian are regulars, all the year round; crested, both lesser and the larger kind, seem only to winter there; about little terns I am still uncertain, for until I went out this year into the deeper waters of the lagoon no little tern had come near me. They were about, though sparingly, in May, June and July. Up at Tada two years running there has been a noisy pair of common terns(?).

It is also worth putting the telescope on the smaller birds at this point, for although we are looking over ankle-deep water, and not the flats of exposed water that the smaller waders like to run about on, there are a few knobs of mud sticking up out of the water here and there, and some mounds of mollusc shells waiting to be loaded on to boats as the raw material of the chunam industry, on which the smaller species sometimes rest, and they deserve to be examined. It is very easy to pass over a pack of small birds with some lazy generalization: 'redshank, mostly'; or 'nothing but little stint'. This is always a mistake, though. However tiny and dull and brown these packs should be scrutinized carefully. They cannot always be, because they are often fidgeting about too fast or are scattered about over a lot of mud the same colour as themselves; or they are too far away; but whenever close observation is possible it is very often rewarding. My latest reward of this sort was five terek sandpipers, seen a couple of hundred yards from these stones, amongst redshank, grey plover and greenshank. I walked up very close to them. 'The terek were the last to be flushed ... though they were joined by a new redshank a moment before they rose. Could easily see their slightly upcurved beaks and their orange-red legs. But first spotted because of their stooping, hunched posture ...' The distinctive carriage or posture of birds is often a useful pointer to their identity: not that the terek poses much of an identification problem, once it is realized that Henry's plate in A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF CEYLON shows the legs much yellower and the bill more upcurved than they usually look in the field, but it is satisfying to spot a small brown blob running along and to feel, before putting glasses on to it, by its stance alone, that it is what it is. Observers elsewhere in India may scoff at excitement over a bird they doubtless regard as ordinary, but they are not easy to see in the south, and I had only found one single bird at Pulicat before, in January. This second record was in May.

Moving on now, after a mug of hot coffee, we find that the wind has freshened and backed a little. The lagoon is broadening out and there are soon waves: not serious ones, but they make it impossible to use field glasses, or a telescope effectively. Some would say that a telescope can never be used effectively; they regard it as a diabolical tool, as if it were some unreliable and fractious piece of antiquated ordnance, an arquebuse which might explode at any minute in the breach, and they tie themselves in the most distressing knots trying to use it. First they simply hang it out in front of them and wave it about. Then, trying to steady it with one hand they close up one of the drawers which should always be fully open. Frustrated, they look around for a tree or a post. There never are trees or posts. They ask to borrow your head, but you cannot keep still because they are nearly pushing you over and you have to struggle to retain your balance. In despair they fling themselves down on their stomachs on the sand, which is wet. This position tests them too much, so they roll over on to their backs and pivot through 180 degrees on their bottoms. Then begins a fascinating interchange of knees and grips and

eyes and attempts to make use of the leather sling, which nearly throttles them. By this time the birds they want to examine have flown far away, and they abandon the attempt, muttering disgruntlement about the design of the instrument being poor. The other day when I told a friend of mine, otherwise instinct with wisdom and good sense, what great pleasure and satisfaction a telescope offered; he typified the attitude of the vanquished tyro by replying, sedately, 'Yes, I can see that it may be fun to look down that thing and see a grey circle wobbling about.' While I will readily admit that a telescope certainly can be trying, especially if it is called upon to do what it is not supposed to do, such as to show you the colour of a Temminck's stint's legs in flight, and while I am as good as anyone at fidgeting about before I can see through one comfortably, it is not an instrument to despise, and is frequently of the greatest usefulness.

In a dinghy rocking about in the water it is at its least effective, though, and it is fortunate that on the open deeper part of the lake at Pulicat there is little to see, certainly in summer-time. A curlew will probably pass over. On 22 May a dozen blacktailed godwit hurried past us; and a handful of little terns could be seen dropping into the water now and then after fish. One can relax for an hour or two, and admire the great sky and listen to the gurgling of the waves. To the east and west the land has become a distant streak of sand capped by a hairy line of palmyras and casuarinas, faintly in the distance lie the hills of Nagalapuram, and half way up the abrupt eastern scrap hangs a pale smoke from a scrub fire.

It is not long now before the horizon to the north, which has been empty for hours except for a few brown sails, sprouts a tree; then, an islet, with poles, nets, and men in the water. It is at this point that a choice of route can be made. On a short two- or three-day expedition in a small boat there are three main possibilities: one is to go north-east and put ashore on the lakeward coast of Sriharikota near Beripeta, another is to go straight ahead to the islands of Irakum and Venadu, and the third is to make for Tada at the north-western corner of the lake.

Beripeta is on the western side of Sriharikota at the point where it is 2 or 3 miles wide. The island is a dominion of the forest administration, and a lot of firewood is collected and sent down to Madras by boat on the Buckingham Canal. To carry wood easily across the island a narrow gauge railway has been built on which wagons are pushed by sweating navvies. I have only been there once, in 1961, and had the privilege of being installed in a gorgeous inspection wagon with a silver-painted canopy and pushed the whole length of the line and back. No obstacle was allowed to bar our triumphal progress, and other trucks along the line in the process of being loaded with fag-gots had to be hastily unloaded and lifted off the rails in front of us. At the seaward end of the line is a delapidated forest bungalow overlooking sand-dunes. The woods and glades we passed through held promise for the naturalist, but unfortunately I have not been back again yet to investigate it more thoroughly.

The route due north, to Irakum and Venadu, is one I have recently taken twice, once at the end of May and once a fortnight ago. I had been flown low over these islands in a light aeroplane, and they looked like bleak desert, with only a few palmyras on them and one or two clusters of huts, which I underestimated. I resolved this summer to explore them, full of dreams of breeding colonies of terns and other delights.

The southern end of the southernmost of the two islands, Irakum, is indeed a sandy negation, but there is a village very near it full of liquor-stills and disturbance. On the first of my trips there my friends and I arrived at dusk and stayed the night on the open beach. Soon after it grew light I walked about on the sands and nearly crushed some eggs under foot. They were four, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and an inch wide, a light sandy-olive colour blotched mostly at the wider end with sepia or black, and they sat with their narrow ends inwards in a shallow dent in the sand ringed half-heartedly with seven or eight flakes of weathered brick and a fragment of shell. These looked too large to be owned by the pair of small plover which had drawn me to the area, and I thought they probably belonged to the redwattled lapwing that had been calling the previous evening, but it was odd that these birds, if they were the owners, were now nowhere to be seen or heard. They usually make a frantic noise if one enters their territory. Then I remembered that last year in England I had very nearly trodden on a similar clutch and these had also seemed too big to belong to the ringed plover that settled down on them a little later. So I set about finding the plovers on Irakum, supposing they would turn out to be Kentish. This proposal was abruptly checked, however, by an irruption of the local villagers. The price to pay, on this occasion, for landing on an un-desert island was to be invested by fifty or more exceedingly tough and loud-mouthed women who asserted, with a lot of gesticulation and rhetoric, that we had taken unmentionable liberties with two of their number on the moonlit beach the night before. So we had to move on hastily, without our breakfast, and I still do not know what plovers laid those eggs.

The second expedition, still very fresh in my memory, was supposed to be to Venadu, which is the bigger of the islands and lies about half a mile to the north of Irakum, divided from it by a narrow channel. The crew of the boat reached the isle of Irakum in the dark, tired of being a crew, and decided that as we were lunatics and could not possibly tell one island from another they might as well beach us on the northern tip of Irakum. This was not however as disagreeable as we feared. We were not molested by shrieking hags, and found the country itself less dreary than to the south. There was a greater variety of trees, a few green paddy-fields, and some gullies full of fresh water. Near our camp was a small oval lagoon, barely four hundred yards long, linked to the main waters by only a narrow inlet. Standing in this was a party of seventy flamingo, which allowed us to get within a hundred yards of them. On the sand and mud fringing the lagoon were some scattered sand plover. The birds I looked at closely were only in partial summer plumage -- the light chestnut feathers on the chest did not meet to form an unbroken band. As usual, most were lesser, but one or two were very much bigger and were probably large, leschenaultii. One other bird amongst them caught my attention and was pleasing to see because I had not spotted one of its kind before at Pulicat. At first sight it was a dunlin: bigger than the sand plover, too plump and short in the leg for a bird of the *Tringine* genus, holding its head tight down on its shoulders and never bobbing up and down as sandpipers do. The black bill was long and curved downwards slightly. It had a creamy white supercilium, and greyish brown feathers on the head, back, wings and on the chest. I soon put it up to see its wing and tail pattern in flight, but was distracted by another similar bird that joined it in the air and they both settled too soon for me. The second time they rose and raced back and forth low over the water they showed conclusively their white upper tail feathers. They were curlew-sandpipers, loitering through the summer and foregoing their proper chestnut breeding plumage. In the stir of their flush-

ing two great stone plovers rose, and a lone marsh sandpiper, too, bringing back memories of wet winter days on the estuary at Tada when acres of flooded grassland are alive with hundreds of these delicate and beautiful creatures.

This was not the end of Irakum's offerings on this occasion. A solitary Indian courser ran across in front of us as we walked towards the shore, and while we were crossing some ploughed fields five small passerine birds flew down on to a bund close in front of us that I am still nowhere near unravelling. It sometimes happens to the inexperienced watcher that a bird appears which is absolutely unaccountable, and which cannot even be allotted to a family, let alone specified. At times one's puzzlement is due to ignorance or unfamiliarity with the birds that may frequent a given area; at others, simply dim-wittedness. Perhaps a reader of the Newsletter will put me to shame next month by explaining these birds; but in six years plodding around Madras I have never seen or thought I have seen anything like them. At first the flash of white on their rumps as they landed reminded me of wheatears, only as they settled I saw that their black tails were a good deal longer and they held them downwards, touching the ground behind them. The colour of the head and upper parts was murrey, almost plum. This faded into a paler sandy colour underneath and to a darker brown or black at the fore-edge of the folded wing and on the primaries. The bills were very short, not unlike a pratincole's in shape, and their legs were pale buff. Their build was slender, their stance upright. This description is lamentable, I fear, but I had only two or three seconds to take everything in, barely time to focus my glasses on them, before they were in the air again and away, beyond hope of pursuit. They flew with a fairly fast wing-beat in scallops like pipits or finches, rising to about twenty feet. Since that brief moment I have spent a long time thumbing through books, and wondering, and staring at the ridiculous little sketches I made on the spot, and wondering again, but no light has dawned yet, and it probably never will.

On our imaginary cruise up the lake we have the leisure to go on now to Venadu, but until I have been there myself I can say nothing useful about it. I only know that when the water level is low it is not necessary to cross the channel by boat. There is a firm track between the two islands which is easy going and where the water is nowhere more than knee-deep. Venadu looks from a distance much more heavily overgrown with vegetation than Irakum, and probably harbours more woodland species of birds than its southern neighbour.

The third route a boat can profitably take, to the north-western corner of the lake off Tada, leads one to the fresher waters at the mouths of the river Kalangi, the biggest of the streams which flood the lagoon in the rainy months. The story of the bird life of this deltaic zone, and of the miles of mud and bog that stretch beyond across the northern fringe of the lake can, I think, safely wait for a later issue of this bulletin; so we will leave the dinghy beached on the shell banks at Nadakadikuppam, isle of Irakum, and return another day.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

This issue is unusual in that it carries a single article. It was thought necessary to print it as a whole. Discursive articles of this type based on meticulous observation are what this Newsletter really wants to present. The editor will welcome your comments on this month's production.

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