

Newsletter for Birdwatchers



Vol. 45 No. 2

March - April 2005

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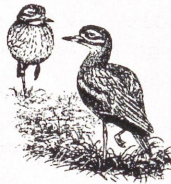
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A Note from the Publisher

Dear fellow birdwatchers,



Violent Tsunamis and Benevolent Mangroves

All of us are aware of the violent nature of the tsunami that engulfed vast coastlines along Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Andaman and Nicobar and Somalia in the aftermath of a massive underground earthquake in the Banda Aceh, on the adjacent coast of Sumatra on 26th December 2004. The tsunami threat has been festering for years and it ultimately erupted without warning and the lay people along the coastline had little time to respond with alacrity.

There is a widespread view that, much of the damage could have been contained on that fateful day, if the natural Mangrovephyte and Psammophyte (sand plants) communities had been left intact along the coastlines, deltas, estuaries, backwaters, bay islands and lagoons. Reports have suggested that some areas of mangroves not only survived the tsunami onslaught very well, but also offered significant protection for adjacent coastal areas. According to Mike Crosby, Research and Data Manager, Birdlife International, Asia Division (in World Birdwatch, Vol. 27 No 1, March 2005, visit www.birdlife.org for details), the town of Krabi in southern Thailand was in all probability spared from colossal destruction because of the adjoining mangroves forests – a precious lesson for preventing calamities in the future. There is a rationale behind this incidence, which cannot be fathomed with our limited knowledge.

Indication is also available to the fact that forest habitats, particularly around small islands in the Nicobar Islands and Sumatra, had also taken the brunt of the furious tsunami waves. However, some forests might die due to the intrusion of saltwater. Yet, mangroves have the capacity to regenerate themselves over a period of time.

The first global environmental assessment published by UNEP has concluded that healthy coastal ecosystems, such as coral reefs, mangroves, other coastal vegetation and intact sand dune systems have the ability to protect people and property. Mangroves function as a natural hedge or barrier in reducing coastal erosion; suppress storm surges, cyclonic floods and wind velocities. The presence of

Egyptian Vulture (Neophron percnopterus) in a flock near Bhedaghat. Photo by Dr. Anil Pimlapure



mangroves with the stilt root system, along the river banks and estuarine mouth, functions as a tide breaker that prevents high speed saline tides and waves and protects adjacent inland vegetation and properties. For this reason, the December 26th tragedy is all the more compelling us, to conserve and restore the degraded mangrove ecosystem.

NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDWATCHERS
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cure leprosy. Bark and sap from *Cerbera* are purgative in nature and the oil extracted from its fruits is used in the treatment of rheumatism. *Pneumatophores* of *Bruguiera* produce aromatic substance. *Avicennia* is a good fodder for cattle, and is said to increase milk yield. *Sonneratia*

fruits are eaten by deer. Fruits of *Avicennia* and *Sonneratia* are good fish food. Marine fish, crustaceans, shellfish, amphibians, birds and mammals are dependent on the mangrove ecosystem. The gross production of phytoplankton, the primary producer in the mangrove ecosystem is always found to be higher than in other oceanic ecosystems. The litter fall and its consequent transformation as detritus results in copious supply of productive nutrition to the ecosystem.

Mangroves have the capacity to trap debris, and protect rich organic soil washed down through river system to the sea and redouble as rich nursery grounds for many marine fish, invertebrates, mollusks, birds, reptiles and mammals. The Royal Bengal tiger of the Sundarbans, the Proboscis Monkey of Borneo and the Olive Riddly turtles of Orissa coast are encountered only in mangrove habitats. Mangroves also regulate rich organic-laden water flow, stabilize the alluvial soils brought in from the rivers, and fix the sediments of the sea with detritus. Thus they are the richest productive ecosystem for sustaining marine and estuarine biodiversity. Bacterio-fungal decomposers thrive and convert mangrove litters into consumable protein which is used by fish population and they ultimately end up with the primary consumers in the food chain such as tigers and crocodiles. Young hatchlings of Olive Riddly turtle have shown remarkable development even up to eight months in the mangrove waterway, utilising the mangrove detritus in their diet. Mangroves also function as a buffer against the spread of oil-slicks washed down from the seas. Some mangrove species are said to grow faster when bathed with the tidal waters enriched with urban effluents. This intrinsic ability of mangroves has long been advocated as a possible remedy for treating urban sewage and effluents. Such a performance has been particularly noticed in Machilipattanam, Nizampattanam and the old Salt lake system of Kolkata, where the mangroves have demonstrated their capacity to ameliorate pollution levels.

The regulation mechanism incorporated in the Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications has many inadequacies in safeguarding and conserving the coastal biota, including the mangroves. The destruction of mangrove community is one of the serious tribulations affecting the tropical marine ecosystem. The reversal of this slide has to be brought about by regulating ship-breaking activities, offshore disposal of toxic industrial effluents, aqua farming, mechanized fishing, lime-shell mining, sand mining, oil-spillage threats, tourism and pilgrimage. These causative factors are collectively jeopardizing the marine food-chain and the deleterious effects have in unison decimated the mangrove community all along the Indian coasts.

Our Editorial Board member, FI. Lt. S. Rangaswami (Retd.), had enthusiastically embarked on a mission to the Gulf of Mannar (GOM) and the Krusadai islands on behalf of Dr. M. S. Swaminathan Foundation, in 2002 to study the ecotourism aspects of the GOM. He took this opportunity to learn more about the shorebirds and the phenomenon of over-exploitation of Holothurians, coral blocks, marine algae,

mangroves with the stilt root system, along the river banks and estuarine mouth, functions as a tide breaker that prevents high speed saline tides and waves and protects adjacent inland vegetation and properties. For this reason, the December 26th tragedy is all the more compelling us, to conserve and restore the decimated mangrovephyte and psammophyte communities, that had once upon a time stood as sentinels all along the Indian coasts, making them impregnable to the furious tsunami waves and cyclones.

One thing that is sadly clear is that the loss of mangrove community has affected the lives of many birds and other related organisms in the marine-food chain. The slide began with the removal of crowns from the mangroves for fodder and other household purposes. The thick foliage and crowns are crucial for mangrove-dependent species such as sandpipers, storks, herons, egrets, bitterns, godwits, curlews, plovers, oystercatchers, terns, gulls and snipes. They not only take refuge and roost amid the foliage but also build nests. They enrich the mangrove habitats with their nitrogen-rich droppings.

India has 6740 sq. kms of littoral regions including deltas, estuaries, backwaters, bay islands and lagoons; collectively classified as mangals (Mangrovephytes), which is the third largest in the world after Indonesia (25000 sq.kms) and Australia (11620 sq.kms). But a significant portion of the mangrovephyte habitat is degraded or lost and the remaining portion is said to be tethering on the brink of eradication.

Just for instance, Kerala had around 700 sq.kms of Mangrove forests all along the coastal areas, associated with estuarine and backwater system. But, at present Kerala's mangrove wealth is reduced to a mere 17 sq.kms; confined mostly to the northern districts of Kannur and Kasargod.

The uses and values of mangroves and the mangrove ecosystem are many. *Nypa fruticans* is a potential alcohol yielding palm; which has good prospects as an alternative automobile fuel. Apart from the utilitarian aspect in the construction field, many mangrove species are useful to a wide variety of professions. The *Rizophoraceae* members produce tannins, adhesives and special glues. It is apparent that Sundarbans is named after the Sundari tree (*Heritiera sps*). This mangrove species has good fiber yielding properties currently in use as flooring and paneling material. Decoction from the fruits of *Xylocarpus* reportedly has breast cancer curative properties. *Exoecaria* and *Sonneratia* are soft wooded and are used as alternate to wood pulp in the paper industry. *Nypa fruticans* produces sugar, alcohol, vinegar, fermented drinks and its leaves are traditionally used as thatching material and due to its waxy coating, it lasts a decade or more. Decoction from the bark is used in the treatment of diarrhoea, dysentery, to stop bleeding, and to cure leprosy. Bark and sap from *Cerbera* are purgative in nature and the oil extracted from its fruits is used in the treatment of rheumatism. *Pneumatophores* of *Bruguiera* produce aromatic substance. *Avicennia* is a good fodder for cattle, and is said to increase milk yield. *Sonneratia*

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eels and sea-shells in the fringing reefs occurring around a chain of 20 islands. Braving the blistering mid-day sun and unforgiving oceanic winds, this octogenarian, had tried to look for clues that could benefit both humans and wildlife. "He is a role model to all of us", wrote Professor M.S. Swaminathan of Mr. Rangaswami's work. He belongs to the old school of naturalists and his penchant for natural history knowledge has enough lessons to be emulated by the younger generation.

Incidentally, the National Mangrove Committee set up under the aegis of Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has considered various options for the conservation of mangroves. Fifteen mangroves including Sundarbans, Bhitarkania, Mahanadi Delta, Kundapur, Vembad, Point Calimere, and Pichavaram, were selected for proper management and conservation. In Coringa, large-scale mangrove afforestation was taken up and in the Pichavaram Mangrove reserve 80% of the natural mangroves were restored. A bolder approach for joint forest management for sustainable utilization, conservation and protection of mangrove habitats is urgently called for. While we're on the subject, Prof.

Swaminathan has given the clarion call to initiate a coastal bio-shield movement along the coastal areas, in his article "Beyond tsunami: an agenda for action".

If a road map to mangrove afforestation is visualised and implemented in stages; managed and utilised in a sustainable manner in India, much of the problems associated with unemployment, hunger and poverty could be alleviated. But the National Mangrove Committee is yet to successfully develop a model for the management of mangrove forest ecosystem that can be showcased as India's preparedness to deal with the socioeconomic problem and the tsunami threat alike. It is no exaggeration to say that the shorebirds will be the incidental beneficiaries of such afforestation programmes and they can gradually regain their long-lost foothold on the mangrove habitats.

Thanking you,

Yours in bird conservation

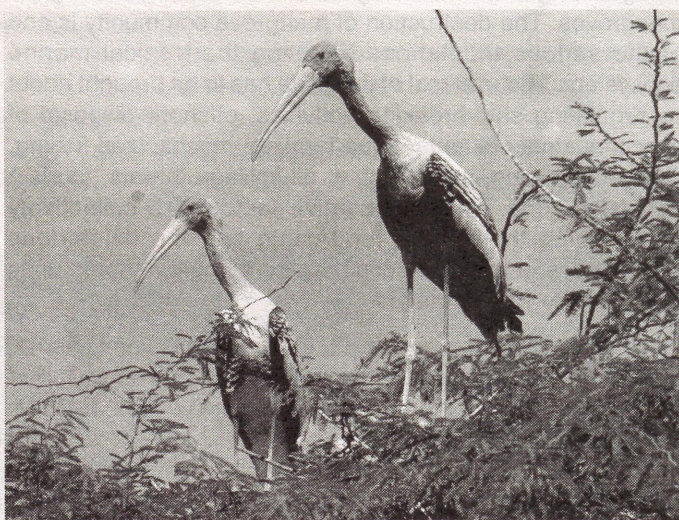
S. Sridhar

Publisher, NLBW



VEERAPURAM:

On 5th March 2005, myself, Biju George, the District Tourism Officer of Ananthapur district and my friend T.N Varapasad of Ananthapur visited Veerapuram which is on the A.P-Karnataka border. It is a painted stork colony situated about 15 km from Lepakshi. On that day I counted 98 nests of painted storks and 4 nests of grey herons. We visited 5 irrigation tanks which were the traditional feeding grounds of painted storks. The Veerapuram, Chilamthuru and two other



Birding Trip to Rayalaseema Area

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nearby tanks were dry. The 5th one *i. e.* Balasamudram tank had water. But water in that tank may not be sufficient for the storks and may dry up by May end. We also visited 4 irrigation tanks on the Karnataka side. These tanks had limited quantities of water but better than Balasamudram tank. Civil work was underway to deepen the Veerapura tank, which is completely dry. A 15 X 15 mt. trench is being dug upto a depth of one meter, under food-for-work programme. At this depth also the soil is extremely dry. The D.T.O informed that there is a proposal to dig a borewell in the tank bed by the government to supply water directly to Veerapuram. He further informed that there is a proposal to fill the tank with borewell water and to release fingerlings in the tank exclusively for the storks. But the tank is very big and the borewell may not have the capacity to fill it. Moreover, the water thus pumped in to the tank will get evaporated or seep into the ground. Therefore, I suggested that the small deepened portion should be filled with water to enable the storks to dip themselves in the water and return to the nest to keep their nestlings cool. Fingerlings could also be released. At present there is a small pit (2 x 2 Mt.) near the handbore which has some water. The villagers said the storks are utilizing the pit water to drench themselves occasionally.

Failure of rains is no doubt the chief cause for absence of water in the tank, but I felt that efforts could be made to maximize water storage by seeking the help of the irrigation department for introducing proper watershed management

methods, monitoring the catchment area for identifying the drainage pattern and waterflow to the tank, removal of obstructions, encroachments, construction of checkdams and contour-bunds wherever possible and studying the soil profile and seepage pattern, in order to take remedial steps to minimise the seepage.

Bonnet Macaques were seen moving in and out of the nesting trees. But the villagers informed me that the painted storks are able to defend their nests from the Bonnet Monkeys. It was observed that the painted storks are always in alert position to defend their nests. But I think the monkeys may occasionally gain an upper hand and destroy one or two nests and steal the eggs.

PEDULLAPALLE:

On 6-03-05, I visited Pedullapalle which is about 15 km from Badvelu to check the status of the nesting colony of the painted storks. The villagers informed me for the last two years and this year also the birds did not visit the village, due to failure of rains and the absence of water in the tanks. When I enquired about the nesting of pelicans in the village, the villagers told me that five to six pairs nested on the village trees, a few years ago. After that season they did not return to the village. However, they said White Ibises are visiting this village for nesting.

REPALLE:

On the same day, I visited Repalle of Porumamilla Mandalam about 15 km from Badvelu, to enquire about the painted storks colony. The villagers of Repalle informed me that for the last two years and this year also the painted storks did not visit the village. Regarding pelicans they said they are

not nesting in the village, but white Ibises are visiting this village for nesting.

BEDUSAPALLE:

On 7-03-05, I visited Bedusapalle located about 12 km from Badvelu, to checkout another painted storks colony. To my relief, I could see some painted storks at nest. I counted 360 painted storks and the villagers informed me that white Ibises are also visiting this village for nesting. Pelicans are not nesting in the village. The irrigation tanks are dry but the villagers informed me that the birds are procuring fish from the Somasila Reservoir which is about 25 to 30 km away.

In the previous issue, the Publisher has bemoaned the tendency to cultivate wetland crops, and the over-exploitation of the groundwater resources, as the causes magnifying the water problem, which was further aggravated by the failure of rains. In the last 4 - 5 years, there was acute shortage of water in most parts of India. For the past 6 - 7 years the country was deeply involved in watershed management by building checkdams, rock filling dams, contour bunding etc., at all possible sites to recharge the water table. The authorities have also taken up the construction of dams, lift irrigation etc., on small, medium and large streams, rivulets, tributaries, and main rivers, to cater to the water needs of ever increasing population. But the position is still critical. If we don't control population explosion, we cannot conserve our environment and biodiversity. All the action taken to conserve wetlands, forests, other habitats, wildlife, birds, and other forms of life will be futile. Topmost priority should be given by environmentalists to control population explosion.



Nesting of Vultures at Girnar Hill, Junagadh (Gujarat)

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It is a rare sight and now a treat to watch vultures soaring in Indian skies. Although, about 95% of India's vulture population has been wiped out, this sturdy species continues to survive in small pockets and in remote areas. This report of Vulture sighting is from Girnar Hill in Junagadh (Gujarat). The Girnar hill is located in the Junagadh district of Saurashtra region in Gujarat state. The height of this hill is 2720 mts and is the second highest point in the state after Jessore hill located on Gujarat - Rajasthan border. Girnar hill is surrounded by pristine forest that includes Girnar sanctuary and reserve forest covering an area of about 40 sq km of undulating terrain.

It was a treat to watch 21 white-backed vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*) at Girnar hill on 26.12.04 at 1300 hrs. The vultures were seen gliding at a height of about 2600 mts

and were identified only after climbing the Ambaji point located on the frequently visited tourist route on Girnar hill. Incidentally, a group of student volunteers had sighted 12 vultures on 3.11.04 at 1130 hrs at the same location. On 6.2.05 at 1300 hrs we were at a height of about 2500 ft on the western side of Girnar hill, when we sighted a lone Long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus*). It was soaring in the sky and suddenly disappeared behind the cliffs of Girnar. The vertical cliffs of Girnar are dry and barren with natural holes and rock cuttings. These rock facings provide an ideal habitat for a cliff nester like a long-billed vulture that is generally known to prefer such habitat. We left the usual tourist route and took an alternative route on the western side of Girnar hill. After an hour's trek we reached a location that enabled us a clear view of the cliffs. A single pair of long-bellied

Sturnidae	Brahminy starling	<i>Sturnus pagodarum</i>	Dicaeidae	Flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum</i> sp.
	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>		Tickell's flowerpecker	<i>Dicaeum erythrorhynchos</i>
Corvidae	Indian tree pie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	Nectarinidae	Purple-rumped sunbird	<i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>
	Horse crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>		Loten's sunbird	<i>Nectarinia lotenia</i>
	Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>		Little spider-hunter	<i>Arachnothera longirostra</i>
Campephagidae	Black-headed cuckoo shrike	<i>Coracina melanoptera</i>	Ploceidae	Yellowthroated sparrow	<i>Petronia xanthocollis</i>
	Scarlet minivet	<i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>		Spotted munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
	Small minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>		Black-headed munia	<i>Lonchura malacca</i>
Irenidae	Common iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>			
	Jerdon's chloropsis	<i>Chloropsis cochinchinensis</i>			
Pycnonotidae	Red-whiskered bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>			
	Red-vented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>			
Muscicapidae	White-headed babbler	<i>Turdoides affinis</i>			
	Asian paradise-flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>			
	Prinia	<i>Prinia</i> sp.			
	Common tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>			
	Leaf-warbler	<i>Phylloscopus</i> sp.			
	Oriental magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>			
	White-throated thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>			
	Pipit	<i>Anthus</i> sp.			



Sightings of *Gyps* (Vultures) and *Aquila* (Eagles) at Dhabla Pound and Thol Bird Sanctuary

Iyer Mohan .K, 2, Tilak-II, Maharashtra Society, Mithakali, Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad -6, Gujarat

Thol Bird Sanctuary (TBS), Mehsana district, Gujarat is 30 km from Ahmedabad and has recently been included in the list of Wetlands Of National Importance by a team of experts who visited the state recently. TBS is also included in the Important Bird Area (IBA) list.

Various species of raptors have been recorded at the lake over the years. Species like the Osprey, which had been last recorded almost a decade ago, has been sighted on a regular basis after the presence of water throughout the year, thanks to the Narmada canal that feeds the lake.

Dhabla cattle pound is approximately 10 km short of TBS. The pound has been in the limelight in the past few years as it is host to over 100 White-rumped vultures *Gyps bengalensis*, a few Long-billed vultures *Gyps indicus*, Eurasian Griffon *Gyps fulvus*, Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*, a large number of Egyptian vultures *Neophron percnopterus* (both resident and migratory) and the now rare Red-headed vulture *Sacrogyps calvus*. The carrion eating *Aquila* species like Steppe eagle *Aquila nipalensis* and Imperial eagle *Aquila helica* have also been sighted at the pound. Birds from the pound have been sighted on a regular basis during the height of the summer season when they came down to quench their thirst and have a cool bath at TBS. On one occasion in May 2000 110 White-rumped vultures were seen at a tube well pumping out water. On another occasion in February 2003, forty White rumped, 4 Long-billed and one Eurasian Griffon were seen behind

the watchtower at TBS, drinking and bathing in a small pool of water.

Last year, after the Workshop on "Current status of Vultures in Gujarat" held on 19th September, 2004 a lot of questions have been raised about the population of vultures in the state. Ahmedabad has been lucky to have Karthick Shastri, who has been monitoring these birds for a few years now and he has been sharing the precious data with Mr. Vibhu Prakash.

On the 7th of January 2005 at 7.15 am, Karthick took me into the premises of the pound. This is the place where dead cattle are skinned every morning. And the sight was simply amazing. Hundreds of birds were seen on the ground around the carcasses and on the near by trees and poles. On the 7th itself we saw around thirty white backed vultures, sixty plus Egyptian vultures, three Long-billed vultures and two Eurasian Griffons. Seven steppe eagles were also seen, five of them on a tree and two on an earthen mound that has been made for the birds. My companion mentioned that a pair of Himalayan Griffons had been sighted at this place a week before. Over the years he has seen that the 2 Eurasian griffons are at the pound for a fortnight while the Himalayan Griffons that he had seen for the first time this year, were there only for a week suggesting that the birds were passage migrants to this area.

The carrion eating Steppe eagle was also sighted. In fact there were seven of them. Four were juveniles, recognized



by the two white bars on the wings. One of the birds had less pronounced bars on the wings suggesting that it was an older immature. The single adult bird could be identified by its much darker colour, a light brown patch on the back of the head (nape) and the gape that extended beyond the eye, a common feature in all plumages and ages.

I visited the pound a week later. The Eurasian Griffons had gone. There were still about thirty white backed vultures, one long-billed vulture and more than seventy Egyptian vultures. Most of the Egyptian vultures that are seen in and around the pound during the winter season are migratory. They are easily distinguished from the resident species by the silver tip to yellow bill. Salim Ali also mentions about 2 races in the Book of Indian Birds. The resident population is augmented by a large number of these migratory birds, which are often seen in the uncultivated fields, basking in the morning sun.

On the 6th of February 2005 on my way back from TBS two large raptors were sighted on a carcass just a few feet away from the road, opposite to the pound. When seen from the field glasses they could immediately be identified as Steppe eagles. One of them was a juvenile while the other was an older immature that did not have the bars on the wings and was lighter in colour.

On Sunday the 13th February, I was again at the pound at 8.00 am. Again, there were about thirty white backed vultures

and 40-50 Egyptian vultures and on top of a tree there were nine steppe eagles.

One bird that was perched right in the middle of the crown was larger and looked different through my field glasses. I quickly mounted my telescope and focused it on the bird. It was large, stout, pale yellow-brown and variegated. The bird had its side or flanks towards me and one could clearly see the pale or white edges of the wing coverts that looked like white lines across the upper wing. I waited for a few minutes and the moment the bird turned I could see the bold dark streaks on the chest and pale feathers on the sides of head and neck. I knew this was not a steppe. I immediately looked up in my field guide and realized that I was looking at the Imperial eagle. This bird has been spotted in the vicinity before. In the winter of 2003 I had the opportunity to see this bird while on a bridge over the Narmada canal. The two white braces on the scapulars of a large raptor could have been only on an Imperial eagle. In 2000-2001, a single adult male was seen perched on a dead neem tree at deva talav, which is 10 km west of TBS.

A large number of resident and migratory birds of prey have been recorded in this semi arid region. Also with a large wetland like Thol, various raptors dependent on water have been sighted regularly. The Greater spotted eagle *Aquila clanga* is one of the common aquilas seen here in winter. Upto five have been recorded on a single visit. This year, its pale variant *Aquila fulvescens* has also been sighted regularly at Thol.

CORRESPONDENCE

SIGHTINGS OF WHITEBELLED SEA EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) IN KUMBAKONAM. GOMATHI. N, Salim Ali Center for Ornithology and Natural History, Anaikatti, Coimbatore - 641 044.

On January 30th, 2005, we went on a trip to Suriyanar Koil, 15 km away from Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. When we were waiting for the bus at the right corner of the Kumbakonam bus stand, around 14.30 hrs, I noticed two raptors foraging at an altitude of about 100m. One was Pariah Kite *Milvus migrans* and it was chased by another species. I was particularly interested in observing it. When it was soaring it seemed heavy and larger than Pariah Kite. I found the characteristics of clear and pure white under parts, white under wing coverts with black remiges and white broad wedge shaped tail. I had seen this bird at Point Calimere during bird ringing camps conducted by BNHS and therefore I could readily identify the species as the White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*. Mean time we boarded in the bus and travelled towards Poombuhar along the Cauvery River-bank. After 5 km from the city, I came across the

same species foraging at a height of above 150 m., but this was a juvenile White-bellied Sea Eagle. Its under parts appeared to be duller white in colour with paler head and diffused brownish sub-terminal band. *Haliaeetus leucogaster* are resident and distributed in the offshore islands from west coast to east coast upto E. Pakistan, Laccadive Islands, Ceylon, Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Salim Ali, 1969). Even though their habitat and distribution are in coastal areas and offshore islands, their sighting is very rare in the coastal plains of Nagapattinam and Thiruvarur districts. With reference to the Book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali and the Pocket guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by Grimmett and Inskipp I confirmed the occasional visit of White-bellied Sea Eagle to inland or tidal rivers and fresh water lakes. The habitat in and around Kumbakonam city is mainly crop fields, farms, orchards, fresh water tanks and ponds, and rivers and situated 70 km away from the shoreline and coastal plains. Therefore sighting of this species indicates that the White-bellied Sea Eagle may have their nesting sites in this region.



SIGHTING OF EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) IN A FLOCK. Dr. ANIL PIMPLAPURE, Q-12, Siddhivinayak Apartments, Laxmi nagar, Nagpur – 440 022 Ph. No. @ 0712-2223022 (M) 9823115335.

Bhedaghat is a beautiful tourist place, situated on the bank of river Narmada, in Madhya Pradesh State.

On Dec. 25, 2004 while going to Bhedaghat from Jabalpur city. I sighted a flock of Egyptian Vultures (approximately 42 in Nos.) on a pond, adjacent to the road.

I observed this flock for 30 min. from approx. 20 mtrs. distance with 7x20 Binocular. Few photographs were taken.

Some observations:

- ▲ One skeleton of an animal was lying approx 100ft. away from the pond. No other food source was seen except small human habitation nearby.
- ▲ These vultures were not busy in any foraging activities, neither drinking water from the pond (Pond size approximately 20' x 15').
- ▲ Other vulture or kite species were not sighted nearby.



BIRDING IN OFFICE, Dr. RAJIV SAXENA, M-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior (M.P.).

I continually lived in the rest house of my office situated at Arera Hills Bhopal, for more than a year. This four-storey building with a basement and fairly large compound has a rest house at top floor. When I arrived here in July 2001, there was no vegetation in the compound. I started planting trees inside and outside along the compound wall – they are now about one and half meter tall. In the compound there are about ten mercury lamp posts and two halogen lights – one lighting the façade and the others the sign-board of the office.

Lights at night attract a large number of winged insects which after flying around these sources of bright lights, disappear at dawn in the vegetation. Some of the insects like big black cricket take shelter inside the crevices of the compound wall. At night black drongo was seen hunting the insects upto midnight by the time I began to feel sleepy.

But in the morning the scene was quite different. As the sun rose, there is a large congregation of black drongos, little green bee-eaters, common and brahminy mynas, house sparrow and red-vented bulbuls – entering the vegetation and picking insects; eating dead insects under the now switched-off lights; bulbuls trying to fetch those already entered into and partially visible from the crevices in the compound wall; crows making clumsy effort to catch insects which come out as a result of shaking of vegetation by the activities of so many birds. This drama was most spectacular in late September and early October after rainy season. In

October, 2002 I saw a sparrow-hawk coming at dawn continuously for four days – picking a large dead moth, then flying to sit in a tree, eating it; and again picking another insect and going to the tree to eat it. It made ten to fifteen sorties each day. From 30 September, one white wagtail could be sighted.

There are many unapproachable portions – girdles, overhanging balcony, light-penetrating domes in the “modern-designed” building. Blue rock pigeons and house swifts have made it their home. About 40 swifts can be seen continuously flying around the building throughout the day except the hottest hours. They have made their nests inside the pipes located along backside wall and are meant to drain water from roof and rooms to the ground and broken at places. They remain dry except for rainy season. Robins and tailor birds sometimes hop into the compound from surrounding bushes.

One mystery yet to be solved in this office is a pair of spotted owlet which is commonly seen but in which “unapproachable” part they spend their daytime, I have not been able to trace despite my best efforts.



SPURWINGED/RIVER LAPWING/PLOVER. Dr. RAJIV SAXENA, M-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior (M.P.).

With the changes in nomenclature of some birds taking place, one has to ascertain which species you are watching and which name you are going to use while writing about it.

To know, for example, about a bird affecting sandbanks and shingle beds of rivers. I had to refer to following names of the same species.

1. Spurwinged lapwing (*Vanellus spinosus*)
- Ripley (1982)
2. Spurwinged plover (*Vanellus spinosus*)
- Ali (1996)
3. River Lapwing (*Vanellus duvaucelli*)
- Manakadan & Pittie (2002)

Now, it is necessary to quote old name with changed ones – both common as well as scientific – for at least a decade during that period the new names will gradually come into practice. Or, alternatively new names can be used with the Ripley's synopsis number.

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ADAPTATIONS IN NESTING. SNEHAL PATEL, *Nature club Surat 81, Sarjan Society, Surat – 395 007.*

With Changes from open lands to urbanization, some of the birds have also started to adapt new materials and sites.

In the past few months I have observed a bulbul nesting on a tube light strip inside a factory full of dust and loud noise. The nesting was successful and the babies have started living in the factory premises surviving on food tit bits offered by workers of the factory.

While transplanting a twenty feet high peepal tree from a construction site to our wetland conservation site we observed an empty nest on the tree, it was completely made from wires, carefully placed to make a perfect cup-shaped egg chamber. There was no shortage of natural material, but the bird simply chose the readily available wire pieces from the construction site. The size was suggestive of a crow's nest.

Recently we saw about 25 weaver bird nests on an electrical power transmission line; they were all so closely built to each other that they were interwoven with the adjoining nest and they were forming a one piece cluster. The shapes were also looking very unusual. The normal colony of weaverbirds looks so beautiful with individual nests swinging from trees, but this colony was somewhat like our row houses touching each other.

Vulture watch

Members of Nature Club Surat observed 36 Vultures, 31 Whitebacked and 5 longbilled behind the Surat airport. They were waiting for their turn to devour a calf carcass. There was a single dog feasting and keeping these 26 vultures at bay.

After the dog had its fill and left, the vultures swooped on the carcass, but within five minutes another dog came and scared the vultures away. Our volunteers tried to keep the dog away, but it kept on returning and ultimately the vultures left. In yet another site near Surat we observed the dogs scaring the vultures away.

We observed that two of the vultures had drooping neck, we have video clip of the event. We also found one of the birds lying spread-eagled on the ground.

Black drongo bathing in a lake

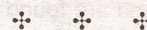
At the Eco Farm of the Nature Club Surat, there is an artificial lake which is surrounded by lots of fruit and wild trees. Every morning at sunrise we see four Black Drongos perched on the windmill.

One day we were at the lake around 9.00 a.m., with a group of school children on a birdwatching trip. We watched black drongos, parakeets, purple sunbirds, common myna, red-whiskered bulbul and red-vented bulbul on the coral trees (*Erythrina indica*) enjoying nectar from the flowers. We also

watched white-breasted kingfishers, small green bee-eaters, pond herons, water hens and cormorants near the lake. The bee-eaters were taking-off from a tree near the lake and gently dipped their beaks in water while flying. We assumed they were drinking water.



Then the black drongos came flying over and started dipping their beaks in water. After some time they flew in once again, but this time instead of just dipping their beaks they dipped their bellies repeatedly in water and returned to their perch to shake off the water. I was observing this bathing phenomenon for the first time in my 20 years of birding.



GATHERING OF STEPPE EAGLES (*Aquila nipalensis*). ASHOK MASHRU, A-7, Alap Heritage, Kalavad Road, Rajkot-360005, E-mail : mashruashok@hotmail.com

On the evening of 17-11-04, While I was travelling in a sight-seeing tourist bus, I saw an eagle perched on a Cheed tree. Later, I returned to explore the area and I found more than 29 similar birds sitting in the upper branches of adjoining Cheed trees. The maximum number on a single tree was eleven. This place is being used as a garbage dumping yard.

These eagles were thought to be Booted Eagles (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), as they have the habit of roosting in flocks. But Mr. Rishad Naoroji has identified them all as young Steppe Eagles (*Aquila nipalensis*) from photographs sent to him.

They were completely silent and no other activities were observed. Did they gather for food or to roost late in the evening?



WINTER MIGRATORY EURASIAN WATERFOWL WADER EURASIAN CURLEW, *Numenius arquata* (Linnaeus) AT INLAND SALINE WETLAND, DIDWANA (NAGOUR DIST.), RAJASTHAN. S.P. BHATNAGAR and SATISH KUMAR SHUKLA, Flamingo Research Station, Ajmer-305006. E-mail: spbhatnagar2002@yahoo.co.in

Didwana is a big Salt Lake about 3 km to the South West of Didwana town, having an area of 777 ha. (1920 ac.), in the Nagaur District of Rajasthan.

No research contributions were made on the Waterfowl of this Inland Saline Wetland of Rajasthan. Inland Saline Lakes of Rajasthan (Sambhar Lake, Didwana and Pachpadra) are important areas for migratory as well as resident waders. The vast Inland Saline Lakes of Rajasthan are very rich in Biodiversity which includes a large variety of 'Phyto and Zoo Plankton, benthic invertebrates, fish and Waterfowl. However, the inland Saline Lakes of Rajasthan are less explored by researchers for studying the ecology of waders, as waders are one of the most important part of shallow water Ecology. To fill up the lacuna in the knowledge of waders in general and the Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata* L. in particular, this study was undertaken at Didwana.

There is an urgent need to survey the wetlands frequented by the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (Linnaeus) (Class Aves: Order Charadriiformes Family: Scolopacidae). Among the species studied, the Eurasian Curlew foraged in saline-water area, and the Black-tailed Godwit and Avocet, foraged in Salt-pans. In the inland saline lakes of Rajasthan, Kentish Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit and Avocet are very common and are found in large numbers.

The shallow saline water and Salt pans are very rich in biodiversity, and therefore the migratory and resident Waterfowl are found in large numbers in these salt pans. Both provide more or less similar type of feeding and roosting habitats to waders. Visual count of the waders on the shallow saline water and salt pans, are convenient during the Waterfowl Census. The methodology used for this study was same as by Waters and Cranswick (1993) and Kirby *et al.* (1995).

Monthly observations show that Eurasian Curlew preferred less disturbances on roosting and foraging grounds. Eurasian Curlew used more exhaustive foraging method like walking slowly. Major diet of Eurasian Curlew was molluscs, (*Indoplanorbis exustus* De Hayes and *Gabbia orbicular* Fraueufed); crustaceans (*Cyclops* sp., *Branchionus* sp., *Moina* sp., *Diaptomus*, sp., *Artemia salina* 1., *Branchinella ornata* -2 Daday, *B. biswasi* Tiwari, and *Eocyzieus politus* B.) and aquatic insect larvae *Artemia salina* was the main food species of this Eurasian Curlew, which was found in Salt-pans. Feeding attempts of Eurasian Curlew were very high.

Eurasian Curlew is a migratory Species. Conservation Strategy is formulated as a cooperative effort to conserve an international

shared resource and as such the strategy belongs to everybody in the region.

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Book Review

PICTORIAL HANDBOOK - SHOREBIRDS OF KERALA, (INCLUDING GULLS AND TERNS), SASHIKUMAR, C.; Muhamed Jafer Palot; Sathyan Meppayur; Radhakrishnan, C. 2004, Edited and Published by the Director, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata. Pp 176, INR 700/-, US \$ 50, £ 30. Review by S. Sridhar, Publisher, Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

Shorebirds or waders are among the most eye-catching and admired groups of birds in the world. Whilst some are sedentary, most are globe-trotters, setting themselves an exhausting schedule of migration, on an annual basis. After completing their marathon winter journey, the waders begin their domestic chore of nest building and rearing the young. When the young have fledged, the birds embark yet again to repeat the strenuous task. Thus the waders lead an extraordinary life that oscillates perpetually between the breeding grounds and wintering grounds; save for periodic refueling pit stops en-route. If millions cherish this hobby of birdwatching across the globe, it is because of the power of their beauty, their formidable strength and their inbuilt determination.

During the early eighties, when birders in Kerala used to observe the birds at estuaries, seacoast and other wetlands of North Kerala, they were always perplexed at the identity of several species of shorebirds encountered. The bird books available at that time were inadequate to deal with this complex group of waders. Later, the book "Shorebirds: an Identification Guide to the waders of the World" (Hayman *et al* 1986) appeared on the scene. Apart from being extremely useful in correct identification, this classic book made the birdwatchers in Kerala and elsewhere, aware of the intricacies of the various plumage phases and dimorphism concerning the shorebirds. In the meanwhile, the Midwinter Waterfowl Census became an obsession among the birdwatchers across the sub-continent in the late eighties and this paved the way for the discovery of some 12 species of shorebirds hitherto unrecorded in Kerala. The case for understanding the seasonal movements on a year to year basis has become stronger thereafter. But, only a handful of birdwatchers possessed a copy of the book by Hayman *et al.*, and this had limited their share of the identification

skills. The birdwatchers of Kerala, felt the need for an exclusive shorebird field guide that was crucial for understanding and fathoming the distribution pattern and habitat preferences of the shorebirds. Consequently, the workshop on the field identification of shorebirds at Madayipura, in August 1995, broadly endorsed the field guide idea, so that more and more birdwatchers can be roped in for monitoring the shorebirds periodically. The above Handbook is the result of the painstaking efforts made by the authors in the intervening years. The Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata, which forms the ultimate scriptural and geographical authority has edited and published this unique shorebirds book.

It is generally accepted that the Order *Charadriiformes* comprises waders or the shorebirds and the book describes and illustrates 71 species belonging to the Order. The book has focused on the climate, wetlands, and the habitats of the State of Kerala and is a good regional guide on shorebirds, gulls and terns.

Besides the main section containing the description, illustration of the bird and the distribution map of 71 species of shorebirds, the book contains a brief introduction to the state, its geographical features, photographs of the various shorebird habitats, a systematic list, select bibliography,

glossary and identification tables for snipes and non-breeding tern, and index to scientific and common names. Such a comprehensive data is meant for different levels of birdwatchers.

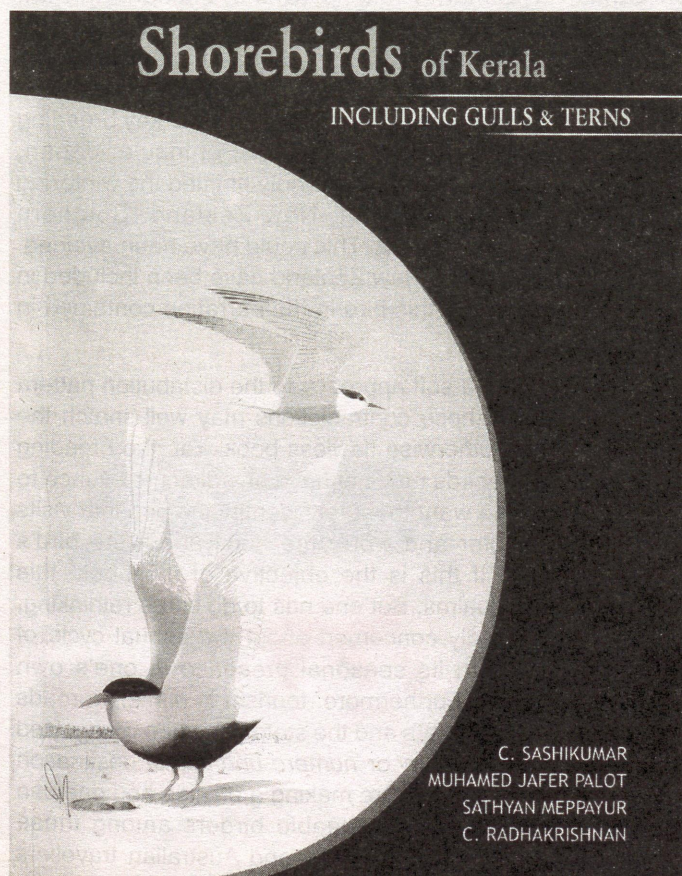
Quite obviously, almost all shorebirds including the migratory types are affected by rainfall, deteriorating quality of wetlands and their reclamation, availability of food and safe nesting and roosting sites. Thus the ephemeral nature of wetlands are in turn considerably influencing the seasonal movement and distribution of shorebirds.

This new arrival is a welcome relief and its popular appeal has been enhanced not only by the scientific merit but also by the simple language which can be understood by the rookies and experts alike. The most impressive feature of the book is in its illustrations. The exceedingly life-like images, carefully painted to the smallest detail, can rival or even surpass the illustrations of any other previous book. The painter (identified as SM, Sathyan Meppayur?) has skillfully portrayed the shorebirds and most of the illustrations have been influenced by "Shorebirds - an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World" by Hayman *et al* 1986. Peter Hayman has himself painted over 1800 birds that are displayed superbly in the 88 colour plates. The illustrations in the book under review are as good as that of Hayman's and the authors have justly expressed their gratitude to Peter Hayman, among others.

The book also connotes and highlights the essential features of shorebirds to ensure their prompt identification. It deals impartially, and dispenses the information lucidly, without compromising on identification principles; both in the still and the flight pictures. Thumbnail illustrations with bird numbers are imaginatively provided on the front inside-cover as well as the back inside-cover, to facilitate instant identification of the shorebird in the field. Such a sustained and deeper engagement to exemplify the diagnostic features is evident in every colour plate, notwithstanding a few setbacks, that are discussed in this review.

The authors have done the praiseworthy job of acknowledging the seminal work of Prof. K K Neelakantan. For well over four decades Neelakantan had traversed the state and single-handedly identified many shorebirds and reported the same in the JBNHS and the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, from time to time. He had bestowed on many budding birders the knowledge required to hone their ornithological skills. The book evidently has the nostalgic aplomb and the lasting legacy of Neelakantan.

Sporadic attempts have been made by different authors to explain how wading birds are different from waders and shorebirds. Previous writers like Soothills and Hayman have sometimes treated the subject differently. Eric and Richard Soothill titled their book as 'Wading Birds of the World' and included several families from the Orders *Ciconiiformes* and *Gruiformes* along with those of Order *Charadriiformes*.



According to them Jacanas, strictly speaking, seldom wade and therefore Jacanas are not included in their book. Coursers and Pratincoles were also excluded by them with the exception of the Egyptian Plover and the Australian dotterel, which were accorded the benefit of doubt by the Soothills. They have included only such of those species that serve the larger shorebird and wader interests.

However, Peter Hayman, John Marchant and Tony Prater preferred to describe and illustrate all species of waders belonging to Order *Charadriiformes* in their book "Shorebirds: an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World". They also included recently-extinct species and species presumed to be extinct. According to them long legged birds (herons, ibises and cranes) do not fall in the category of waders or shorebirds and hence get excluded. Such of those species that are so different from the true waders and covered well by Harrison and others in their field guides to the seabirds were particularly excluded by Haymen *et. al.*

In the same way, gulls and terns have been abjured in the works of Soothills and Haymen, who probably consider them to be belonging to Order *Gaviae*. But Sashikumar, Palot, Meppayur and Radhakrishnan have included 19 species of gulls and terns belonging to the Family *Laridae*, in the book under review, because the ground for such an inclusion was already there in the book "A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan" authored by Ripley, who had included gulls, terns and skimmers belonging to Family *Laridae*, under the Order *Charadriiformes*.

Some shorebird criteria may compel the authors to preclude species like the Coursers that are well adapted to a life in the desert. The courser's bill is pointed and slightly downward curved and well adapted for catching or picking up insects. It runs along the ground at impressive speeds and does not probe the ground or wade in search of food. In principle, the idea to include gulls and terns, which have webbed feet well adapted for swimming and much of their food, is picked up from the water surface whilst skimming the surface or by plunging into water whilst winging, and not whilst wading, may seem a little strange. However, the authors of the present work appear to be moving towards a balanced and sensible approach by including the coursers, among other birds that may not meet the shorebird criteria in the strictest sense, but they have followed the footsteps of the earlier workers like Ripley.

Armed with this book, one can acquire ample field knowledge that will enable him or her to identify the shorebirds with ease and discern the phenomenon of shorebird-diversity that is apparent across the rivers, estuaries, backwaters, lagoons, mangroves, sea shore, paddy fields, canals and reservoirs across this peerless state.

Ornithologists across the world have dealt with the shorebirds over a long period of time and have developed distribution maps that could prove useful in the shorebird conservation campaigns. The book is packed with prudence

and principles that are reasonably sound at first glance. However, quite a few inaccuracies have got commingled with the book. The trouble begins when one starts to notice some contradictions in the distribution maps and the illustrations of the dimorphic varieties of shorebirds.

Yet another area that needs attention is the seasonal movement of waders. The book is in essence about the shorebirds of Kerala. Since most of the shorebirds visit the state during winter from far away places, an effort has been made to show their summer ranges in the Oriental, Palaearctic, Australian and African zoogeographical realms. A distribution map for each and every shorebird described is provided underneath the bird, detailing the breeding and wintering areas in different colours, in an attempt to trace the whereabouts of the shorebirds. The ranges of the resident or locally migratory species are also indicated in different colours.

The book, so painstakingly put together, has taken a first blow with the distribution maps beginning to miss the essential distribution patterns. This has happened in many cases. A case in point is the breeding range of the Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*). This bird has an extensive breeding range that extends from Scotland across Europe and Siberia to the Kamchatka Peninsula. It has an equally impressive wintering range that extends to the Mediterranean countries, Africa south to Cape Province and Natal, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, China, Hainan, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. Whilst quite a few congregations of Greenshanks proceed to southern England, others set on a voyage to Australia and the Zealand. But the distribution map for this species has excluded some of the key breeding areas, like Scotland, the Kamchatka Peninsula, Japan, Korea, Taiwan etc. It has also glaringly omitted the wintering areas that include Australia, New Zealand, Southern England, Java and Sumatra. This could have been avoided. However, Australia and New Zealand have been included in the wintering range of this bird in the narration contained in the text.

There seems to be a soft approach to the distribution pattern of shorebirds and these contradictions may well snatch the spotlight from an otherwise flawless book. Yet, the breeding range of the shorebirds may not have any direct relevance to Indian birders, who want to merely identify the bird that visits their state in winter and worry the least about the bird's summer ranges. If this is the objective of the book, this reviewer has no qualms. But one has to do some rethinking, if one is also broadly concerned about the annual cycle of the bird, apart from its seasonal presence in one's own backyard in Kerala. Furthermore, tourism is making inroads into Kerala in recent years and the state has been recognised as the *God's own country* or *numero uno* tourist destination in India. Many westerners are making a beeline and one can expect quite a few knowledgeable birders among these tourists. In all certainty, European and Australian travellers to Kerala, referring to this book, will be perplexed to note the

The fact is obvious, when for instance a third of the global population of Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) winter in Britain, but Britain is not included in the wintering range of this bird in the map. Therefore, the authors must take a second look at the distribution maps and arrange to provide accurate intra and inter-continental shorebird footprints; at least in the future editions. It is essential for anyone referring to this book, to consciously safeguard against the pitfalls contained in the maps and it is only natural for reviewers to discuss threadbare these mismatches.

Another contradiction that has come to the fore is the illustration of dimorphism in the case of Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*). This could further prey on the confusions of an ill-informed birdwatcher. The text describes plumage differences between the male and female, but there is only one illustration i.e. of the female. Neither the male's illustration, nor the subtitle of the bird illustrated is printed alongside. For a birder sighting such a rare bird as the male ruff, will for sure be perplexed not to find its illustration in the book. Curiously, males outnumber females in Britain in winter, but females are in the majority in East Africa and South Africa. Possibly we should also try to estimate the male-female ratio of Ruff and Reeves in India, during the mid-winter waterfowl census.

The book also begs the question whether a landlocked country like Nepal is a promising destination for a purely maritime shorebird like the White-cheeked Tern (*Sterna repressa*), which occurs in high seas and along the coastlines. Conversely, the Black-bellied Tern (*Sterna acuticauda*) is essentially a bird frequenting inland wetlands and fresh water bodies. But in the map, it is depicted as if this tern occurs along the Indian coastline only and not inlands.

As indicated earlier, the main aspect of the book that clamours for attention is the distribution maps. The near perfect understanding of the migration pattern has given way to half-hearted attempts involving a blunt sketch pen for

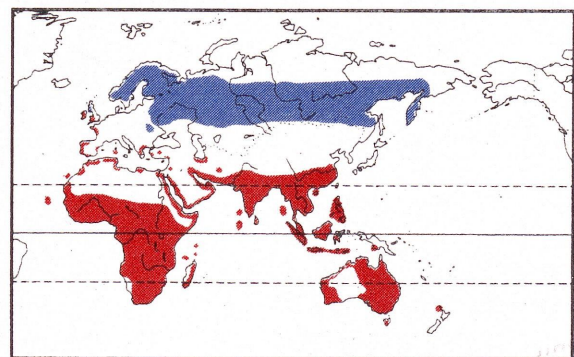
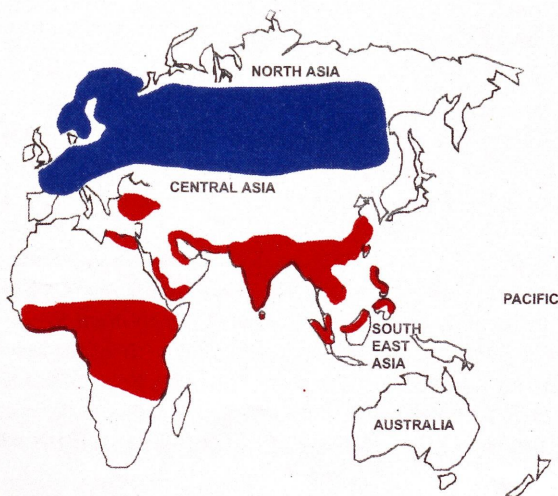
marking the coastline, instead of using the a razor-sharp pencil or a pen to show the distribution range. The Spotted Redshanks (*Tringa erythropus*) are not changing their spots any time soon. These redshanks visit Japan, southern China, Malaysia, and Borneo during winter, but the map has not included the above areas. A sizable population of this bird is spotted in Britain during winter, when strong easterly winds prevail. These points are also grossly overlooked in the distribution map. A question may be raised whether it is prudent for the reviewers to air certain contradictions that are likely to adversely impact the book's prospects. The case of the Redshank is by no means an isolated assessment. The distribution maps for some 45 of the 71 species of shorebirds (63%) contain such glitches and they need to be recast, paving the way for a realistic outlook of the shorebird distribution. Therefore, the authors must initiate an exercise on a war footing, to address and resolve the ambiguities in the contentious area of distribution maps.

Nonetheless, this reviewer would like to hastily add that his observation is by no means to be construed as a negative verdict or a rebuff, but ought to be taken in a positive spirit. Being a Government of India publication, this line of reasoning need not be overemphasized.

There was ample scope for incorporating peculiar habits and behaviour of many shorebirds under the sub-heading 'Habits'. For example, the Little Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius dubius*), have the habit of espying predators and feigning a broken wing and rolling over the ground with astonishing slight of feet, to distract the predator's attention away from the nest. Such information would be of immense interest to students of behavioral ecology.

The book could have done much better if it was produced in demy octo size (5"x 8") instead of crown quarto. It is obvious that the plates were designed for the demy octo size book, but printed in the larger crown quarto size, for reasons not clear to the reviewer. The book would have been much more

Common Greenshank's (*Tringa nebularia*) distribution map as given in the *Shorebirds of Kerala* (left) and "*Shorebirds: an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*" (right)



compact in the demy format and the production cost could have been slashed a good deal, without compromising on the picture size, font size, text or pagination, and thus making it easy on the buyer's pocket.

The hope is that the authors will pool the available information to overcome the deficiencies in the future editions. Such an earnest effort on their part could augur well for making this

NEWS FLASH

IVORY BILLED WOODPECKER SIGHTED IN N. AMERICA

First Confirmed Sighting Since the Second World War

As reported by Charles Seabrook in Atlanta, for New York Times News Service, dated 29th April 2005.

For nearly 60 years, bird lovers have slogged through the swamp waters of the Deep South, along the bayous and rivers feeding the Mississippi River, searching in vain for a spectacular bird long thought to be extinct - the ivory-billed woodpecker.

In news bound to electrify bird lovers worldwide, scientists are expected to announce on Thursday the "rediscovery" of the ivory-bill in a remote swampy area of northeast Arkansas known as the Big Woods. At least one male ivory-bill has been found alive and well in the deep forest of bottomland hardwoods between Little Rock and Memphis. It is the first confirmed sighting of the long sought bird since World War II. Other ivory-bills are presumed to be living there.

"It's incredible news," said Steve R. Runnels, President of the American Birding Association. "This is the most exciting ornithological discovery in a long, long time."

The U.S. Interior Secretary, Gale Norton, and officials with the Nature Conservancy, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission are scheduled to make the announcement in Washington on Thursday morning.

The on-line edition of Science magazine is expected to publish on Thursday (28th April 2005) a detailed account of the woodpecker's rediscovery.

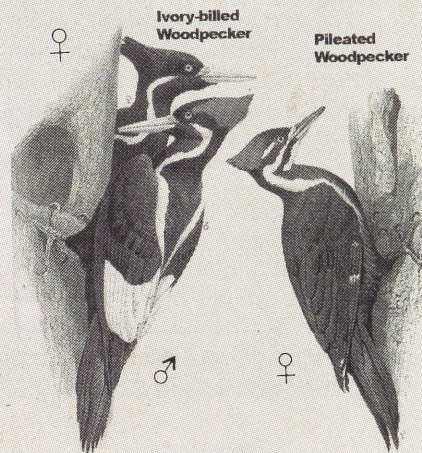
Mary Scott, an Arizona birding enthusiast who has pursued the ivory-billed woodpecker for years, posted on the Internet an account of her personal encounter with the bird in Arkansas.

She said her sighting two years ago of the white-striped woodpecker with a crested crown helped spur scientists and conservation officials to come to Arkansas and confirm that the bird, indeed, is living there. Larger than a crow, the

hobby, much more fascinating and worthwhile. We at the Newsletter have been consistently pleading for developing new yardsticks to sustain and maintain our country's status in the ornithological world. We are persistently proclaiming our support for a cooperative type endeavor in a variety of ornithological fields. At the same time, there can be no two opinions that Indian bird books must strive to match global standards and expectations.

ivory-billed woodpecker was - and perhaps still is - at 20 inches the largest woodpecker in North America. Its call, say those who have heard it, is a nasal "kent-kent-kent" what some say is like the sound of a child's tin horn. The bird once ranged from Texas to North Carolina.

P. S. The largest woodpecker of North America, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) was presumed to be extinct, as there were no confirmed sightings since the 1950s; a few may still survive in pine forests of Cuba. Unconfirmed sightings in recent years in Georgia, Florida, Louisiana and Texas were actually that of the smaller Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*), which is smaller and lacks the Ivorybill's large white wing patches. White chin and dark beak also distinguish the Pileated Woodpecker. Its nearest relative in India is the Great Black Woodpecker



(*Dryocopus javensis*). Mary Scott's Ivorybill sighting is perhaps the most exciting ornithological discovery after the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) in India.

- Publisher, NLBW.

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Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Cover: Male **Black-backed Woodpecker** (*Chrysocolaptes festivus*) at nest. This cute woodpecker lives singly or in pairs - clambering studiously about trunks and branches of trees where a cache of borers, termites, spiders and the like abound. Armed with its miniature pickaxe like beak, it chips off the bark and rotten wood to expose the grub-galleries and uses its long sticky tongue to lap up a contended meal. Therefore the woodpeckers are a welcome lot in the woods, for their professional qualities as termite demolishers. The biggest threat to the continued existence of this primary hole-nester, is coming from deforestation, dearth of old grown trees, hunting pressures and confrontation with secondary hole-nesters like the Indian rollers, mynas and parakeets. The secondary hole-nesters are quite often witnessed heckling and tormenting the woodpeckers and forcing them to abandon their nests.

Photo S. Sridhar, ARPS



Palas (*Butea monosperma*) in Rishi Valley Campus planted by Rangaswami

Profile of a Naturalist

S. Rangaswami

In Words & Pictures



In Krusadai Island
12-04-2002

September 14, 2004

S. Rangaswami - The Naturalist : A Tribute

It gives me much pleasure to pay tribute to Mr. Rangaswami and his many decades of selfless work at the Rishi Valley Education Centre. Mr. Rangaswami's tall ramrod straight figure, with binocular strung around his neck is now eighty-four years old, but looks much younger — a living example of Salim Ali's observation that those who watch birds need not age. Though Mr Rangaswami's range of interests is very wide: teaching children about nature, admonishing their parents against the use of plastics, creating a national course on conservation and ornithology, bending over to remove parthenium weeds, planting trees, working with gardeners, creating compost pits, conducting systematic surveys of the local flora and fauna, ministering to a flycatcher's broken wing, devouring works on philosophy and nature, writing books and letters to the editors of newspaper, lecturing to diverse audiences and drawing eminent naturalists to the School — all these come within the compass of his vision. It is birds that stand at the centre of that vision.

It is in Rishi Valley; located in the drought region of Rayalseema, that Mr. Rangaswami's vision, of a green world filled with bird song, found fulfilment. A touch of magic has always attended this naturalist's relationship with birds — a Paradise Flycatcher, with its white beribboned tail flitting through the trees, heralded his entry into the Valley. It was flying, Mr Rangaswami clearly recalls, from the office into the ravine near Palm House. He had come to Rishi Valley, in 1973, to take on administrative duties as Bursar, having sought early retirement from the Air Force. On weekends he had shed his Bursar's duties to communicate his passion to students, during bird-watching expeditions. In that inhospitable landscape, he methodically listed almost 90 species of birds. He also presided over water conservation programmes, strategically locating small ponds and tanks for thirsty birds to drink from in the summer, planting *peepals* for them to roost on, and nectar-bearing *erithryna*

for the hair-crested drongos. He had left Rishi Valley in 1977, leaving behind a legacy of flowering trees and a band of students who would introduce casual visitors to the flora and fauna of the region.

I became closely associated with Mr. Rangaswami in 1990, when, after an absence of almost 12 years, he returned to the Valley. He came this time without any specific designation, but with a well-defined purpose — to create an officially recognized sanctuary for birds, and to continue his field ornithology work along scientific lines. His survey indicated that the number of species in the Valley had more than doubled — earlier years of conservation seemed to have paid off. (The most recent bird count taken in December, 2001 stands at 201). In 1994, Mr. Rangaswami celebrated these events with a book, *Birds of Rishi Valley and Renewal of Their Habitats*. Richly illustrated, with photographs by his friend and co-author S. Sridhar, the book won favourable reviews in many leading newspapers and journals. Harry Miller called some of the prose magical, Sanctuary Asia magazine prominently featured a chapter of the book and Mahesh Rangarajan of the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi described the writing as ‘... vintage natural history, reminiscent of the late M. Krishnan.’

In April 1997, Mr. Rangaswami's established a Department of Bird Studies as part of Rishi Valley School. In order to create a permanent presence for the department, he upgraded it to its present status, an Institute of Bird Studies and Natural History. The Institute, which lists the eminent ornithologist Dr. Shantaram on its faculty, draws visiting naturalists from different parts of the country to the valley and engages in conservation activities. Mr. Rangaswami extended the range of the Institute's activities still further by creating an ambitious Home Study Course on ornithology. He single-handedly wrote out all 23 out of the 25 chapters of this course in two months, in a period of feverish creativity. When the designing of this course and production of the study material presented additional problems, he switched roles and became an assiduous fundraiser. The funds he collected now support a scholarship scheme for prospective students, which include housewives, senior citizens, and school going children, as well as underprivileged members of society from almost every state in India. Mr. Rangaswami plans to conduct training courses in ecological restoration, bird identification in the field and bird census

surveys in the summer, when students are out of school and college. 'He is a role model to all of us,' wrote Professor M. S. Swaminathan of Mr. Rangaswami's work.

Mr. Rangaswami won the Sanctuary ABN Amro Green Teacher Award for 2001. The citation described him as 'an educationist first and last, he represents the emergence of a powerful new force for nature conservation – teachers.'

In February 2002, Professor M. S. Swaminathan invited Mr. Rangaswami to become Visiting Professor of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. He is to guide the Foundation in developing an Educational Tourism Programme in the Gulf of Manner Biosphere. The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. Jayalalithaa, has accepted one of Mr. Rangaswami's main proposals in the Report he wrote, namely, to establish an Institute for Bird Studies in the Gulf.

Mr. Rangaswami's presence at Rishi Valley School has enriched the lives of students and teachers. He has made us aware of a source of beauty that we might otherwise not have seen or heard. He has taught us to care for the natural world. His achievements stem from his dedication to wisdom, to beauty and to the well being of all living things. Through his writings he has spread the environmental message in the country. The comment of another great naturalist, Roger Tory Peterson's may help to explain the passion of Rangaswami's life: "If we are to save the birds, we have to make as many people as possible aware of the threats to their survival.... We must save the birds, and in saving them, we will save the earth."

Radhika Herzberger

Dr. Radhika Herzberger
Director
Rishi Valley Education Centre



Magpie Robin accepting the nest box installed by Rangaswami at his Rishi Valley residence.

October 1, 2003

Mr S Rangaswami's contribution to Rishi Valley's Ecological Regeneration

In the course of seventeen years that Mr. Rangaswami has spent at the Rishi Valley School, he has contributed in myriad ways to the cause of environmental regeneration, at local, regional and national levels. Mr. Rangaswami is essentially a teacher, with a rare capacity to communicate his love of nature to different classes of people: villagers, gardeners, rural and urban students, professional teachers and amateurs. He is also a writer with wide interests. Above all, he has a catholicity of outlook that wins over people to the cause he espouses. He has dedicated all his talents to service of the environmental cause. I briefly list his achievements in what follows:

- On the national level, Mr. Rangaswami has created a Home Studies Course in Ornithology that attracts students from Nagaland to Gujarat and Jammu to KanyaKumari. The course is extremely detailed and supplements the textual material with short-term field study courses meant to familiarise participants with conservation, habitat management and biodiversity enrichment practices.
- As author, he wrote *Birds of Rishi Valley and Renewal of their Habitats*. The book won several favourable reviews in the leading newspapers of India, including Frontline, Hindu, Hindustan Times and Times of India.
- On the regional level, he has helped enthuse nearby villagers who play host to painted storks and other migratory birds that visit the region. The aim of this grassroots work is 'To monitor the status of nearby wetlands and ensure protection of the avifauna including migrants which depend on these water bodies for sustenance and survival.'

- Mr. Rangaswami is Advisor and Visiting Professor to the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, with a brief to develop an Educational Tourism Programme in the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve area.
- Mr. Rangaswami's proposal to establish a Centre for Bird Studies in the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere area was approved by the Hon. Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. J. Jayalalithaa.
- As a hands on activist, he has built several small ponds and lakes for the birds and animals of the region and helped nurture many rare species of plants, shrubs and trees, including those with medicinal uses. His interest in creating sacred groves has led to the planting of trees with religious associations, like the banyan, peepal and bilva all over the Rishi Valley Campus. In 1992, he was the instrumental in declaring Rishi Valley a Bird Preserve and in 2001 established the Institute of Bird Studies and Natural History. The Institute is presently undertaking a study of the endangered Yellow-throated Bulbul. Thanks partly to his efforts Rishi Valley School earned the *Indira Priyadarshini Award for 1997*.
- With the help of the students of the school, he made a detailed checklist of the birds of the valley and its immediate environment. Several generations of students have been taught to record breeding patterns, behaviour and distribution of birds in a scientific manner. Mr. Rangaswami received the *Green Teacher Award* in 2001, granted by Sanctuary Magazine and ABN-AMRO Bank. He was cited as representing 'the emergence of a powerful new force for nature conservation – teachers.

Radhika Herzberger

Dr. Radhika Herzberger

Director

Rishi Valley Education Centre

Excerpts from Letters of

Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Chairman,

M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Chennai - 600 113

My dear Shri Rangaswami,

Meeting and hearing you in person about the ecological "miracle" which has taken place in Rishi Valley will always remain an unforgettable experience. What you, Mr. Naidu and others have achieved is not a miracle in the sense that this term is normally used. It is a miracle achieved by hard work and by identifying oneself totally with nature.....

Many thanks for a copy of your wonderful book written with S. Sridhar. Also, thanks for the article of Robert Kaplan. The following quote from you cited by Kaplan needs to be included in every school text book in our country in bold letters.

"Birds are the litmus test. The return of the Yellow throated Bulbul to Rishi Valley constitutes the official proof of the ecological renewal here".

This is a simple biological indicator of supreme significance in measuring the relationship of humans and nature.

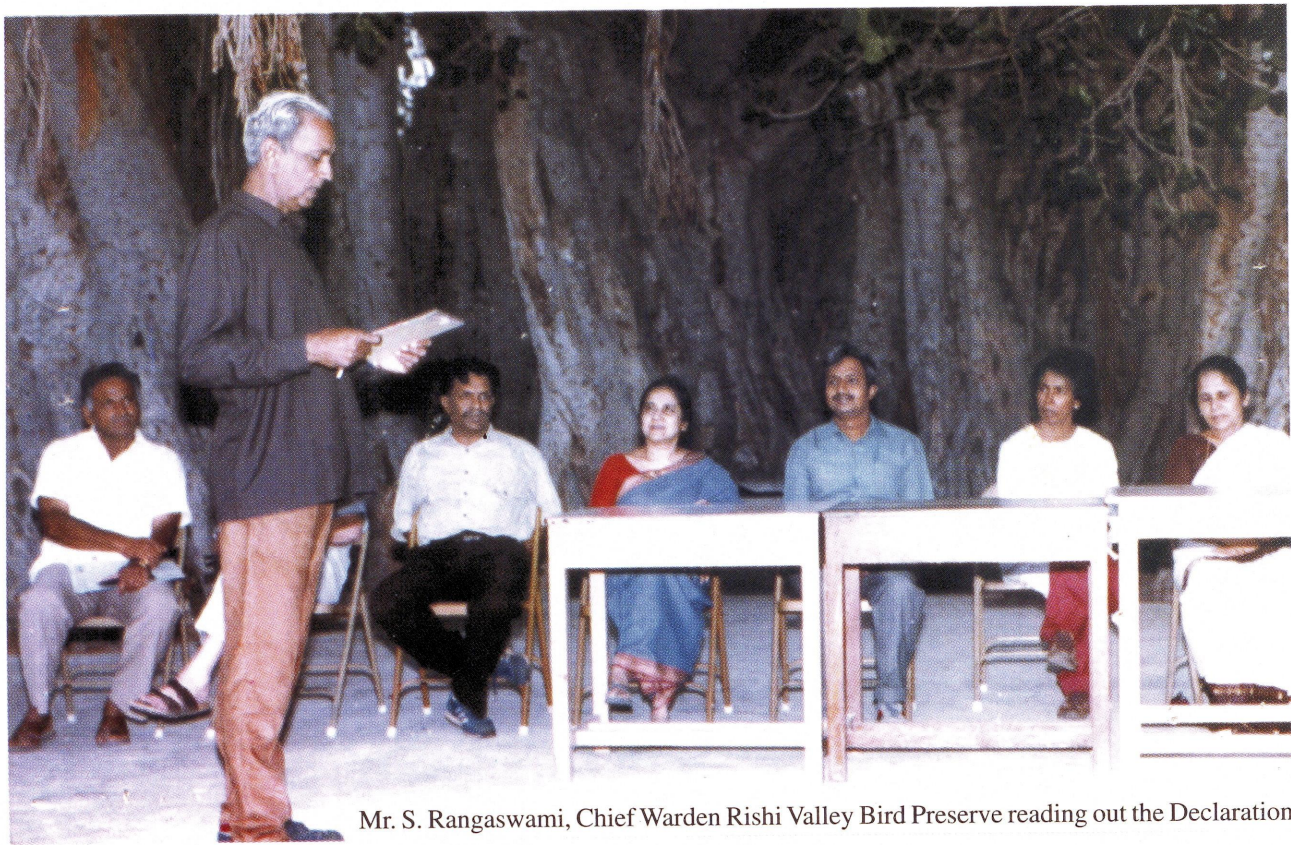
I wish you many more years of active, healthy and happy life, so that you can spread the joy of true living to numerous young girls and boys.

(18th January 1999)

* * *

I particularly thank and congratulate you on initiating the Home study course in ornithology. I find this course most interesting and timely since it not only fosters a culture of love and care of birds, but also serves as a course in environmental education. The study material for this course is very user friendly. No wonder many candidates from all parts of our country have enrolled for this course.

(Contd.....12)



Mr. S. Rangaswami, Chief Warden Rishi Valley Bird Preserve reading out the Declaration

RISHI VALLEY DECLARATION – July 1991

A landmark in the ecological history of Rishi Valley

Declaration of RISHI VALLEY as a “PRIVATE BIRD PRESERVE”

We solemnly declare that Rishi Valley shall henceforth be considered as a PRIVATE BIRD PRESERVE under the direct control and supervision of the Management of Rishi Valley School for the purpose of preserving, protecting and enriching the avifaunal wealth, habitat diversity and flora of the Valley as a whole, appreciating their inter-dependence.

We undertake to offer our co-operation for promoting increasing understanding of Rishi Valley's bird life in all its aspects among the Students, Staff and others with the object of bringing them closer to Nature and developing in them an abiding interest in preserving its Beauty and Purity in the light of the Teachings of Krishnaji.

We shall always endeavour to promote a high degree of environmental awareness among all Residents of Rishi Valley and to encourage Bird Study and Birdwatching on scientific lines-among students and others elsewhere.

Signed this Twenty Seventh day of July 1991 at Rishi Valley under the Sacred Banyan Tree.

Radhika Herzberger

DR. RADHIKA HERZBERGER

Rebecca Thomas

MRS. R. THOMAS

M.A. Hahid

M. A. HAHID

Dr. S. A. Shirali

Dr. S. A. SHIRALI

Nirapata Sujbera

NIRAPATA SUJBERA

Prof. Hans Herzberger

PROF. HANS HERZBERGER

M. Thomas

M. THOMAS

S. Sundaram

S. SUNDARAM

Dr. S. A. Shirali

DR. S. A. SHIRALI

N. S. Neelaka

N. S. NEELAKA

S. Theodore Baskaran

S. THEODORE BASKARAN

Mrs. J. Lakshmi

MRS. J. LAKSHMI

V. Santharam

V. SANTHARAM

Mrs. Geetha Iyer

MRS. GEETHA IYER

Mrs. Sudha Saridhar

MRS. SUDHA SARIDHAR

S. Sridhar

S. SRIDHAR

S. Rangaswami

S. RANGASWAMI

K. Praveen Karanth

K. PRAVEEN KARANATH

Karthik Shankar

KARTHIK SHANKAR

Sarah John

SARAH JOHN

A GARDEN OF KNOWLEDGE

Nuria Verde

Planeta HUMANO No.18 - August 1999

Madrid Spain

“Ideas That Change The World”

(Translated from Spanish)

Mr Rangaswami could be a character from a Garcia Marquez novel - his life is pure magical realism. He is a sage who speaks with birds and trees. Each afternoon, he goes out walking, with binoculars around his neck, to talk with his creatures..... Rangaswami is full of enthusiasm, overflowing with energy, and he has never lost the capacity for amazement. His themes of conversation run from imitating the love-songs of birds to talking about Socrates and Schopenhauer. He is an expert on birds and also supervises the gardeners. His sense of design and feeling for beauty has been instrumental in the greening of the school campus.....

We go walking with him, his forehead high and his white hair brushed back. He is a very tall man wearing a polo sweater, the colour of red earth. We make our way through the lianas of a banana plantation in a late afternoon air scented with warmth and serenity. Suddenly his eyes open wide: “Look! - a beautiful kingfisher”. He peers through the binoculars. “And over there the white egret has returned. He had to come back here.”

We walk among st calendulas, bougainvillea, hibiscus and sandalwood trees. Then he stops and says, “My enthusiasm in my eightieth year is the same as when I was a boy. I still have the same love of life, the same curiosity. My mind is intact and that’s a blessing. There is so much work I still want to do at Rishi Valley.”

In Rangaswami’s house we find fresh limes scattered on the table amidst a chaos of papers and books. “Forgive the mess. It’s because I live alone,” he apologises. There is also a large photo of a lady with a sweet expression looking compassionately at the disorder in which Rangaswami lives. He becomes quietly sad when looking at that photograph, of his late wife. “What have I learned in this life? Always look with your inner eye – that’s what I have learned” is his refrain.

EDITORIAL

• Planeta

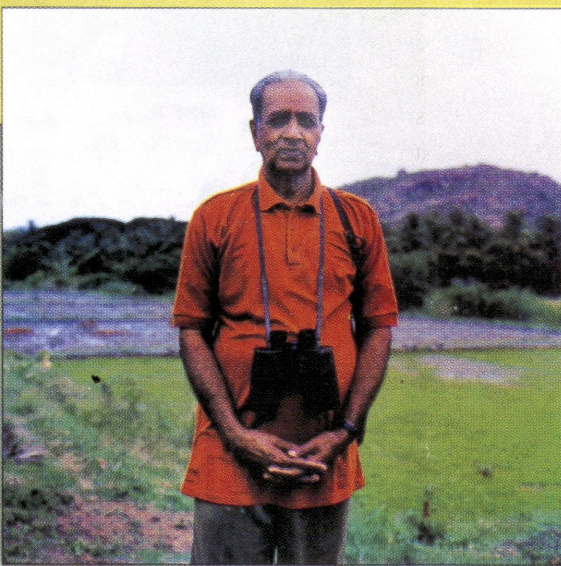
HUMANO

IDEAS QUE CAMBIAN EL MUNDO

Planeta HUMANO cuenta historias de personas con ideas que contribuyen a mejorar al planeta.

Planeta HUMANO busca a esas personas en todos los sectores de la actividad humana (cultura, economía, solidaridad, política, medioambiente, ciencia...), las localiza, envía a sus equipos y divulga sus historias con la libertad que le permite su independencia editorial.

Descubrimos la existencia del valle de Rishi en el libro de Robert Kaplan *Los confines de la tierra*. Kaplan, viajero experimentado y no dado a sentimentalismos, escribía: "El Valle de Rishi es posible que sea menos una historia del éxito indio que una historia del éxito de toda la humanidad. Este valle nos muestra que existe la esperanza, que la especie humana no acabará destruyéndose a sí misma". Él, a su vez, había oído hablar del valle en la Universidad de Toronto, por la sencilla razón de que un profesor de esta universidad está casado con una mujer india. Las efectivas soluciones que se aplican en el valle a temas tan esenciales como la pobreza, la regeneración medioambiental, la



ciones externas, ni casi, de fondos extranjeros.

Recuerdo que en la última epidemia del ébola en Zaire los enviados de la Unión Europea se negaban a entender que con

de la mayoría de los occidentales impide apreciar la riqueza de muchas soluciones que dan a los problemas las culturas locales. Quizá como consecuencia de esto, el valle sea un

El señor Rangaswami parece salido de una novela de García Márquez. Habla con los árboles y con los pájaros. "¿Lo que he aprendido en esta vida? Mira siempre con tu interior. No mires con los ojos".

What we need urgently are opportunities for the economically and socially underprivileged sections of our society to participate in this fascinating programme. I hope you will be able to get adequate financial support for establishing a corpus fund and for awarding scholarships to the needy. I wish this timely and well-planned Home Study Course in Ornithology great success.

(26th February 2001)

* * *

Meeting and spending some time with you help to restore and rekindle my faith in the ultimate human destiny - harmony with Nature and with each other. The citation for the Green Teacher Award given to you has rightly stressed that you are a "Teachers' Teacher"; your passion and dedication for the cause of creating reverence and love for all the inhabitants of planet earth are contagious and have helped to breed a new generation of youth committed to the care of birds and trees. The message you gave me under the Banyan tree will always remain with me and I shall do my best to follow it.

You have demonstrated that the songs of birds and bees are the best indicators of the health of an ecosystem.

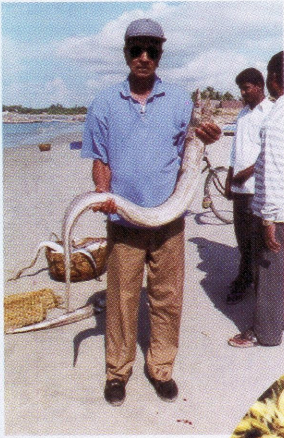
(28th January 2002)

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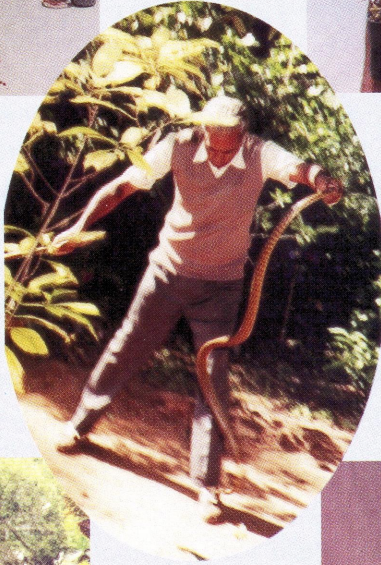
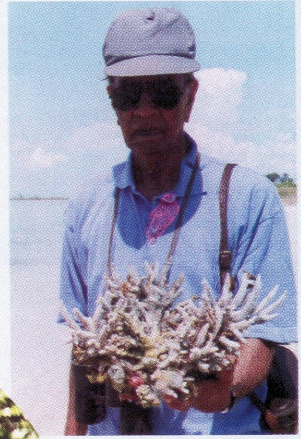
You are a role model for all of us. In my lectures now to the younger generation I quote your words "the songs of birds and humming of bees are reliable indicators of the health of an ecosystem". I was recently in Thiruvannamalai and saw the wanton destruction of the unique Arunachala Ecosystem. I mentioned to them that they should invite you some time to take your guidance on achieving the dream of Bhagwan Ramana that Arunachala should be preserved for posterity in its pristine purity.

(24th September 2002)

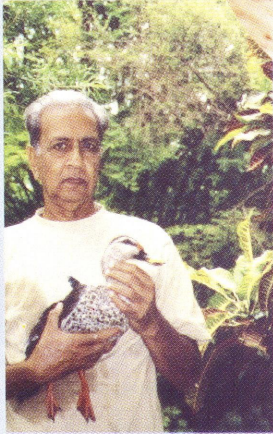
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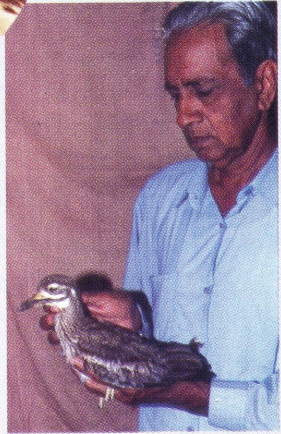
At Mandapam
(Rameswaram)



◀ A Rat Snake
saved and left
in the wild.



◀ A Spot bill
rescued from
a poacher



▶ A wounded
Stone Curlew
retrieved by
Mr. Sridhar

Sanctuary
ASIA



ABN-AMRO Bank

Wildlife Awards 2001

Green Teacher Award

S. Rangaswami

For moulding thousands of young nature lovers and preparing them to become future green citizens.

An educationist first and last, he represents a powerful force for conservation. During his years at the Rishi Valley School, he encouraged birdwatching, executed water conservation programmes and protected bird habitats. He established the Department of Bird Studies at the Rishi Valley School, which was later upgraded to an Institute of Bird Studies and Natural History. He is a green teacher in every sense of the word and has set an example for other teachers to follow. For this, we honour him.

Romesh Sobti
EVP & Country Representative,
ABN AMRO Bank

Bittu Sahgal
Editor, Sanctuary Magazine

Excerpts from
THE ENDS OF THE EARTH –

A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century by Robert D. Kaplan
(Part VI, Chapter 24, Rishi Valley and Human Ingenuity, Page 354-368)

The Naturalist, Mr. Rangaswami, binoculars dangling from his graceful, six-foot-plus frame, ambled out of the woods and began talking, sweeping me along with his commentary for a brief forty-five minutes: It was the overture to my valley experience.

“Birds are the litmus test,” Mr. Rangaswami declared. “The return of the Yellow throated Bulbul to Rishi Valley constitutes the official proof of ecological renewal here. Before we heard that warble for the first time some years back, we just couldn’t be sure of anything.” Mr. Rangaswami led me through a rich undergrowth of vines, ferns, red sanders, sandalwood, custard apples, tamarinds, acacias and lemon grass. “There has been a 300 percent biomass increase. Notice the red sanders. They are drought-resistant and grow absolutely vertically. We chose them because their roots anchor the soil without interfering with the other greenery.....”

Mr. Rangaswami went on about solar panels, organic vegetable gardens and replacing butane with the gas released by cow dung, while at the same time pointing out parakeets and a group of owlets. With his winglike arms constantly in motion, his plume of iron-gray hair and lilting Indian voice, he seemed to be one of the “150 species of returned migratory birds” he so loved. Especially as he had never really introduced himself but, rather, had swept down into my presence. Suddenly, he stopped his lecture and put his finger over his lips, admonishing me to keep silent – as though I were the one who had been talking. “No, that’s only a white egret”.....

Mr. Rangaswami, in his seventies..... discovered his true vocation in Rishi Valley, where he took up bird-watching and became the “honorary chief warden” of the nature reserve. Eccentric he may be, but Mr. Rangaswami is not a super-romantic. He is part of a movement that believes ecological renewal is essential to cultural renewal.

* * *

