

# NEWSLETTER

FOR BIRDWATCHERS

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NEWSLETTER  
FOR  
BIRDWATCHERS

Vol. 6, No. 1

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STRANGE CHOICE OF ROOST BY CROWS

By

K.K. Neelakantan

That crows, mynas, house sparrows and parakeets prefer to roost in larger numbers in trees standing in the middle of crowded bazars is wellknown, but I used to think that this was due to the absence of more suitable roosts near by. A recent experience makes me wonder whether these birds deliberately choose trees in the heart of the town.

Towards the end of the third week of November I was passing through Shoranur (central Kerala) at 11 p.m. It was a dark night. The spot where we had stopped was at the very centre of this small town, not far from the Railway Station and close to a hotel which is open all night. It is also the town bus stand, and till about 10 p.m. is full of bustle. Throughout the night lorries and buses stop there and small, noisy crowds of people are never absent. The place is also brilliantly lit

from dusk to dawn. Yet a clump of Pongania trees standing under a street lamp and in the glare of the fluorescent lights of the hotel sign was full of crows. Those I saw clearly were all House Crows. They sat without any attempt at concealment, and could easily be seen by people. There were innumerable trees, much taller and larger than the Pongania-s everywhere in the town, but the crows had chosedn to roost in the 'lime light'.

I was surprised to find that some of the crows were calling, some moving from twig to twig, and a few every now and then flying up 50 to 60 ft. into the darkness overhead. Few of these last were seen returning to their perches. One crow sat across an electric wire, calmly preening!

It was evident from the large and extensive patches of droppings under the trees and the white coating most of the leaves had received that the roost had been in regular use for a long time.

I believe that many kinds of birds prefer to roost in trees close to man's dwellings. I have found Tree Pies, Blackheaded Orioles, Tailor Birds, Ioras, Whitebrowed Bulbuls, Paradise Flycatchers, Crow-pheasants and Whitebreasted Kingfishers preferring roosts close to the roof. In the Thekkady Game Sanctuary I found large numbers of Grey Wagtails coming from the surrounding forest to a tree near the rest house to roost. . . Also the trees near Aranya Nivas were extremely popular as roosts. Obviously the proximity of human beings affords some security to the birds from certain kinds of predators, though I should think that this would be more than set off by the danger from domestic cats. Perhaps the crows of Shoranur were also impelled by this instinct to roost where the constant presence of human beings gave them a feeling of security.

But those crows which occupied branches close to the road must have spent very disturbed night. Some of them were behaving as though the sun had risen! Did these crows deliberately occupy perches where sleep would be impossible, or were they the late-comers who could not find better accommodation?

Do crows habitually prefer a grove of spreading trees -- such as mango, banyan, etc. -- or, do they quite often spend the night scattered about over a larger area in coconut and other trees? In Trivandrum there are still very well-wooded patches with large spreading trees. But I find that at one place crows seem to sleep in small numbers on various coconut trees. This roost is not at all a spectacular one, and I discovered that quite a few crows were spending the night here only because on a number of occasions I happened to hear crows calling from various trees well before sunrise and when crows had not begun to fly about. It should be mentioned that these crows were heard during the non-breeding season, and so such a large number could not have been occupying nests in that area.

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## BIRD VOCATIONS

By

Mrs. Jamal Ara

Nowhere in the world is there another bird which can claim more dexterity than the Indian Tailor Bird, which sew together leaves to form a receptacle for their nesting materials.

Master artisans as they are, they make fairy tales come true by thousands each summer, when they roll spider's webs around their small beaks, and using it as thread do their sewing. Along the edges of the leaf they puncture a series of holes with their beaks, and then thread these holes with the gathered cobwebs or the fibres using their beaks as needles. They work very quickly with uncanny skill, the hen-bird inside and her mate outside. One pushes the thread through a hole; the other catches it and pushes it back through the next hole. The thread is then pulled tight and fastened. When the nest is finally complete, the birds go over their work again and put in additional stitches where there is a possible weakness in the structure.

Next to the Tailor Bird in craftsmanship is the Weaver Bird or Baya, which combines the functions of a weaver as well as basket maker. This small seed eater usually hangs its nest from the branches of a tree overhanging a stream. The nest is built exclusively by the male. The light nest, elaborately woven of grass or strips of leaves, is weighted with lumps of clay to prevent it from swaying in the breeze.

These two are well known. But there is a third, the Ashy Wren-Warbler, which, not satisfied with one type of nest, builds three different kinds, and is a master at the construction of each. His first is the same as that of the Tailor Bird, and the Ashy Wren-Warbler proves himself a better craftsman at this type of construction as well. In addition he builds a substantial oval-domed affair with the entrance on one side.

Plastering is done by many birds, but the most remarkable piece of work is the one done by the Hornbill. As soon as the hen lays her eggs in the hollow of a tree, she imprisons herself in it by walling up the entrance with her droppings using the flat sides of her large bill as a trowel, and leaving only a narrow aperture through which the male feeds her. The skill with which the wall is constructed is that of a mason. She remains a prisoner there until the chicks are hatched, when she emerges by breaking down the wall, but rebuilds it at once. During her imprisonment, the male works hard to feed her. He brings food to her incubating prison, taps at the entrance, and feeds her when she puts her head out of the opening.

The Chestnutbellied Nuthatch, which nests in tree holes, also plasters the opening, reducing it to a tiny round one, through which it can squeeze its body. The female, however, does not imprison herself in this case. The House Swift mixes small particles caught in flight, particularly feathers, with its own saliva to make cup or saucer shaped nests plastered against walls or under the eaves of houses.

The bird names Kingfisher and Woodpecker remind one of human vocations. The Kingfisher, specially the pied variety, hovers over water and then dives straight down to catch fish. It has, however, another vocation, that of a miner. It excavates in river banks tunnels up to seven feet long and nests there. Another miner is the Bank Myna, which is to be found in the river-line sandy tracts of big rivers. This also burrows deep in river banks, and also tunnels intercommunicating 'Tube ways' to link one nest with another.

The above list is not exhaustive, but merely indicates the different vocations practised by the artisans of the Indian birdland.

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## A COPPERSMITH'S BROOD

By

V. Ravi

A pair of Coppersmiths nested in an almond tree early in the year and raised a brood by March. The failure of that brood with the death of young birds was followed by a second brood.

A week after the fledgling of the previous brood there appeared the first egg of the second brood. One day before it was laid we observed the mating; as the male mounted the female it made a peculiar noise; then he fed her; once a neem fruit was given.

Only two eggs were laid on two successive days -- on 31st March and the 1st of April. There was rain on both days, and the female had to spend long in brooding them. The incubation was an affair of 17 days. The female was on duty most of the time, the male once in a while only.

In the first days the incubation was done in stretches of considerable periods (20 to 40 minutes each time) at the end of which the bird would come to the orange tree close by to preen and rest, the female occasionally visited the peepal tree where the male dwelt. In each stretch again there were breaks for usually 2 to 3 minutes and possibly more. During these breaks the bird used to come only to the entrance of the nest. When the weather was cloudy and cool the incubation was done in irregular periods; sometimes it was only 1 or 2 minutes and at other times more than 20 minutes. In the last days the spells of incubation were comparatively much shorter.

In the table that follows a record of incubation is given, based on regular observations made for reasonable periods at suitable times. We have shown the record of some days, not of all the days on which observations were made.

Incubation by the female bird. The letter E with Serial Nos. 1, 2, etc. indicates the days which elapsed since the laying of the first egg.

Days	Time	No. of spells	Duration of incubation in each spell	Total length of incubation time on each day
E4	60 minutes morning	3	7, 7, 17½	31½
E6	20 minutes morning	4	1, 1½, 1, 11	14½
E8	25 minutes evening	4	1, 1, 6, 10	18
E11	32 minutes morning	5	2, 2, 3, 2, 12	18½
E13	30 minutes morning	5	8, 3, 4, 2, 3	20
E15	54 minutes evening	10	3, 1, 1, 4, 1, 1, 1, 3, 3, 6	23
E17	21 minutes morning	3	3, 3, 3	9

The nest bed was softened by pecking out the wood; no foreign material was added as a lining.

On the 13th day of the incubation the female appeared at the entrance of the nest holding a downy feather in its bill early in the morning.

On the day previous to the hatching of eggs the male, which was all along absent, was noticeable near the nest.

Feeding started on the 17th April with two young birds to be fed. In the first few days the chicks were given a diet of pecpal berries. The female was attending on the brood constantly. In the early days sometimes the bird used to keep the babies warm by brooding. It rained one evening and the female sat in the nest brooding the chicks without feeding them. Actually every day from 6 p.m. onwards no feeding took place though there was half-an-hour of daylight. At that time the bird would sit preening itself, spending its time there on the orange tree. By 6.40 the bird had gone to sleep.

The droppings of the chicks were from time to time collected and carried outside. It was usually the lot of the female to scavenge; at times the male too took a turn at the work. The hen-bird always gave a final clean-up before settling for the night.

The rate of feeding went on at an increasing pace. In the second week the fare was diversified a good bit by the addition of ripened neem fruits, which were available in plenty by then. At the same time the pecpal tree (the headquarters of the pair) which was also fruiting abundantly provided an added supply of food.

On the 11th day the two chicks were still naked. At noon they might be sleeping, as the parents brought no food. The adults outside had an anxious time all that day, because the security of their nest was in danger. Two other coppersmiths had newly arrived in the neighbourhood, and were trying to nest. The newcomers gave a lot of trouble and set up a lot of noise. On the next two days one bird approached the nest but was soon driven away. On the 15th May (the 4th week) the feeding was in progress by 6 a.m. early in the morning.

Finally, after five weeks, the two young birds fledged; and on the 21st May they disappeared from the nest. On the night previous there had been quite a storm. We even feared that the brood had perished. The young birds were nowhere outside. And there was rain water in the nest. Later, however, we found the chicks alive. They were presumably taken to the pecpal tree. One chick used to accompany its mother during the latter's occasional visits to the nest. The female is still keeping in touch with the nest, often sleeping in it at night.

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WATCHING THE NEST BUILDING OF A PAIR  
OF HOUSE SPARROWS IN MARCH AND APRIL  
1965

. By

Kameshwar Pal Singh

Readers may recall that some time ago birdwatchers were asked to concentrate on studying the life history of the House Sparrow. The following article and the note in the Correspondence Section have been received in response to the appeal - Ed. 7

The nest was situated at a height of 7 ft. from the ground behind a picture hanging on the wall. Although the nest building was done mainly by the male he was helped occasionally by the female. The nest materials were generally dry grass, hay, paper pieces, cotton, and jute pieces. The clutch consisted of four eggs and they were laid even before the nest was quite ready. The first egg was laid on the 3rd March, the second on the 4th, the third on the 5th, and the fourth on the 6th. The female brooded both in the daytime and at night. The male always brought some tit-bits to repair the nest and it also guarded the nest in the absence of the female. The upper opening of the nest was closed 3 or 4 days after the laying of eggs. The nest was repaired even upto 10 days after the laying of the eggs.

The eggs hatched on the 16th and 17th March after 12 or 15 days. Once I put my hand ~~whix~~ inside the nest in the presence of the female. It flew away and came only when the male accompanied it and the male visited the nest first as if to make it sure that there was no danger. The feeding of the chicks was done by both parents. I think the male takes a fairly prominent part in feeding the chicks. For the first few days the diet consisted entirely of grubs. At night the female remained in the nest and the male sat on the cornice of the ceiling. The chicks were almost double their size on the 4th day. Wing quills began to appear on the 7th day. On the 10th day the eyes opened and by the 14th day body feathers developed except for the primaries. On the last few days the diet consisted mainly of grains, insects, and grubs. Grain generally rice and wheat were freely used in feeding the chicks at least 4 or 5 days before leaving the nest. By the 5th April almost all the fledglings left the nest. But only two could be traced in the near-by bush. The one flew by itself and I helped the other to go to the near-by bush. The fledglings remained in the bush for 5 or 6 days. They were fed there by both the parents.

The birds were again seen mating on 10th April. The second brood was raised in the same nest after minor repairs. A clutch of 4 eggs was laid between the 15th and 17th April. The eggs hatched on the 27th and 28th April. The female was caught and coloured on 30th April. It did not return to the nest that day but the next day it was again seen feeding the chicks. On the 16th May when the nest was examined, it was found empty. It cannot be ascertained how the chicks disappeared, since there was no chance of any marauders like cats or other predators.

When I examined the empty nest carefully, I found that it contained two skeletons of chicks from the first brood and the

the partly decayed body of a chick from the second brood. This explained why only two fledglings were found in the first brood. But it still remains a mystery where and how the chicks of the second brood disappeared.

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EXTRACTS FROM 'FOUR AGAINST EVEREST', BY WOODROW  
WILSON SAYRE (Arthur Barker, London 1961). Commu-  
-nicated by R.E. Hawkins

pp. 115-16

Ever since Camp I several large, black, raven-like birds had followed our progress and scavenged our camps. I have no idea what they normally eat at these altitudes, since we saw nothing else living. But they certainly read the sign "meal-ticket" written across our backs. One or two were always in sight. Apparently we had underestimated them badly. They went right through the burlap sacks and the plastic bags in our cache with their beaks. Our food was scattered all over. Their favourite was the meat bars. We could ill afford the loss of these precious supplies, transported with such effort so far. We salvaged what we could and piled rocks on top to frustrate any future efforts. And then I started worrying about our essential cache at Camp II. It was not protected by rocks. The ravens were squatting all around us as we left. This could be a disaster. Our only hope was that, luckily, we had stored the food in the canvas marine sacks, and so far they had not pecked through these much tougher containers.

p. 120

After making our cache, we all moved the tents up the East Rongbuk, about an hour's walk beyond the cache of yesterday. We were chagrined to find the cache broken into and scattered. Norm feared some type of rodent. We tried to make a rodent-proof sanctuary of fitted rocks. But it was obviously impossible. Then I reflected that there weren't supposed to be any rodents up here anyway. It was probably the ravens again. They were strong and they could knock down the lighter rocks. Their long beaks can poke through the holes. So we used really heavy rocks and we made double walls. It turned out that these in fact were successful. But we had lost some more food.

[The first extract refers to a cache on the West Rongbuk glacier, c. 20,000 ft., and the second to a point about 21,000 ft. Both were within about 20 km. of the Rongbuk Monastery in Tibet.

But Camp I was on the west side of the Nup La, rather more than 20 km. from any village.]

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#### Review

WHERE EVERY PROSPECT'S VILE. By W.H. Thorpe, F.R.S. (Hanish Hamilton). Price 25s.

(From The Observer - Weekend Review dated 17 Feb. 1963)

A Swiss chemist received the Nobel Prize for Medicine for discovering, in 1939, the outstanding properties of D.D.T. as an insecticide. As a result of this discovery, many insect-borne

diseases, for example typhus and malaria, became controllable and were even eradicated in some areas. Untold numbers of human lives were saved and the yield of many crops was greatly increased.

It was at first widely stated and believed that D.D.T. was quite harmless to man and to all other vertebrates, whether fish, mice, cattle or birds. In due course further similar compounds such as aldrin, dieldrin and heptachlor, all of them "chlorinated hydrocarbons", were produced. These have an even more powerful effect as insecticides. Then it was found that D.D.T. was harmless to many only when used in powder form, which is not absorbed through the skin. When in solution or when swallowed, all these substances are definitely poisonous to higher animals of all kinds.

Next a most sinister discovery was made: not only are these poisons absorbed, but instead of being excreted again as are many other poisons, they are retained, and accumulate indefinitely in human and animal bodies. This happens particularly in those organs which contain a good deal of fat -- the adrenals, the testes, the liver, the kidneys and the nervous system. The daily dose, however minute, inexorably piles up. When we put these substances on our farms and gardens, insects are killed or immobilised, and organic compounds in the soil retain the poisons.

The earthworms get their ration, and the birds get larger doses still from eating them, or the insects, or both. So birds and many mammals in their turn become sick. Trembling and confused, they fall an easy prey to hawks, owls and foxes which thus get even larger doses, often with a spectacular mortality over wide areas of countryside -- as has happened in the United States and to a lesser degree in this country. Those birds which are not killed swiftly often survive apparently unharmed, but infertile, laying sterile eggs. It is the same story (with minor variations as to the route of contamination) with man's farm animals, game birds and domestic pets. So man himself begins to store his pesticides in his own body, getting them from milk and butter, from meat, from sprayed vegetation and from stored grain.

Whether the dose we are yet getting is nearing any danger level is still in debate, but that it will reach this level in due course if we continue using these substances as in the past cannot be doubted. Some of these materials are implicated as probable cancer-causing agencies, and there are other grave effects. The end result could be a tragedy vastly worse than that due to thalidomide.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Mother Sparrow teaches chick to fly.

November 20, 1965, evening 5.30 to 5.35, the verandah before my room which is about 20 yards from the main Kurla Road, Andheri East.

A sparrow chick fluttered down squeaking on the verandah floor a couple of yards away from where I was sitting. And in an instant its mother came down quietly and stood beak-to-beak with her chick. She had no food for it but she was 'acting' as if she had some which she wanted to feed it!

The chick didnt open its beack, but it rearranged and tightened up its tiny wings, gave a quick glance at its mother; then the mother flew off and the chick unsteadily followed her. The mother flew off the verandah, but the chick just could reach a flower-stalk on one of my palm pots.

For a few seconds the chick balanced itself on the lean long stalk as on a tight rope. The mother flew back and perched on the stalk by the chick, and repeated her "act of feeding". The chick clearly paid no heed to her "feed-acting", but went on squeaking nervously, its body balance too had been greatly disturbed by the mother's perch on the spray-stalk, so it adjusted its balance and then flew off even before the mother could guess what her chick was up to. For a moment she watched her flight, but the father reached the scene and he perched on another spray-stalk; his whole body was swollen and voice all anger. The mother meekly cheeped to him and flew off toward her chick.

The father preened his wings a moment, as if to give vent to his paternal bad temper, and flew away. I had seen before many times the father sparrow driving away with noisy curses the chicks out of the nest, out of my room. But it was only yesterday that I saw how the mother teaches her chick to fly! The whole scene took no more than five minutes.

Chitta Prasad  
Ruby Terrace, Kurla Road, Andheri

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Birdwatching trip to Rani Ban, Nepal

May I please add a postscript on the little article I sent you recently?

Our birdwatching trip to Rani Ban, Saturday, the 31st of July, proved very well-worth while. We were delighted to watch a house crow mothering her two almost fully grown koel step-children. Mr. Jamie Sandoz of Oregon, U.S.A. spotted a dead branch 45 ft. above ground where a crimsonthroated barbet was carrying food to its young. Our surprise of the day was the large yellownaped woodpecker which I had never seen in this grove on any of my previous 54 visits.

Robert L. Fleming, Ph.D.  
Shanta Bhawan, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Migrants in Chikmagalur District, Mysore State

You have probably read in the papers that what was 'old Mysore State' has suffered badly from lack of rain and drought conditions prevail in many districts and this one in particular. This may lead to some unusual movements of birds and it would be interesting if members could note and write in to you about them.

I unfortunately cannot get about much myself but the one 'tank' I constantly visit which is normally about 60-70 acres in extent now only has about 6 inches of water over 5 or 6 acres. This has resulted in an influx of the Blackwinged Stilt and there must have been something like a hundred of them there last evening (November 9, 1965). A few Pintail duck and Garganey teal come and two Brahminy duck, the latter I have never seen here before although odd ones are seen further east.

G.V.R. Frend  
Kadur Club, Box 29, Chikmagalur  
Dist.

A robin teasing a rufousbacked shrike

On 16 June 1964, after sunset I observed a rufousbacked shrike perched on a small bush with a male robin accompanied by two females on the ground near the same bush. As soon as the shrike saw a dainty morsel it flew down to the ground to catch it. The male robin also dashed forward and tried to rob the shrike of its rightful prey. The robin did not succeed. The shrike moved on to another bush near by and the same story was repeated twice. Possibly enraged by its repeated failures the robin made a diving attack at the tail of the shrike as it was sitting perched on a bush. Beyond expressing its disapproval of the robin's misbehaviour by shrieking the shrike did not actively retaliate but indicated by its manner that it was not going to tolerate any nonsense.

V.N. Kelkar

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