

How does one set about searching for a shy little bird that has not been seen for over eighty years?

This elusive bird is the Jerdon's Courser or the Double-banded Courser. The species was discovered in 1848 by Dr. Jerdon, then a civil surgeon at Nellore. He procured two specimens in the hilly country above the Eastern Ghats, off Nellore and in Cuddapah (Andhra Pradesh). Some twenty years later, Blanford collected two more birds near Sironcha and Bhadrachalam above the Godavari river valley. The next sighting, by Howard Campbell in 1900, was in the Pennar river valley near Anantpur. The species has not been found anywhere else in India or for that matter, in the world.

Between 1929 and 1977, several surveys and 'explorations' were carried

out in the Godavari and Pennar valley areas, by Whistler and Kinnear, Salim Ali, the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and WWF-India. But the Jerdon's Courser could not be found. The Courser had not been sighted since 1900 and it was deemed to be extinct. But Salim Ali was not satisfied and in 1985 the BNHS initiated a research project to settle the issue.

A preliminary survey and some spot checks were carried out by Bharat Bhushan, a young field biologist who has just been awarded a Master's degree for his work on the great Indian Bustard. Bhushan explained how he set about the task:

"Between June and October I spent many weeks trekking from village to village over the Pennar river course. I distributed a number of colour posters depicting the Jerdon's Courser and questioned forest department officials and the local shikaris about the possible presence of the bird. These shikaris, usually Yaanadi tribals, are very poor, and they subsist by trapping small game such as partridge, quail and hare. They are experts on the topography and wild-life of their locality."

Several persons claimed to identify

timitta Forest Rest House on his motor-bike. He intended to set up a one-man base camp nearby, and was prepared to spend many months in the field, if necessary.

But things moved faster than expected. A casual remark of the range forest officer led to an exchange of messages with Aitanna, through an obliging bus driver. Aitanna had caught 'some bird,' Bhushan must come at once! And Bhushan set off on his bike for Reddipalli village about forty kilometers away. "It was raining heavily," he remarked, "and the Pennar was flowing over the bridge at two spots. The roads were a muddy mess."

At Reddipalli, Aitanna came out of his hut with a quiet little bird in his hand. As soon as the bird stretched its neck, Bhushan knew that his quest was over. "Lifting Aitanna's hand," he recalled, "I could see the white collars margined above and below the brown gorget. There was a faint white mesial (parting) line in the centre of the black crown. Now there was no doubt."

It seems that Aitanna's party had a few nights earlier flushed a covey of partridges. At the same time, a *kalivikodi* had walked out of the bush and had

The courser that came in from the night

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The Elusive Avian: The Jerdon's Courser

The Jerdon's Courser was last sighted in 1900. Thereafter no recorded sighting had occurred until recently when Bhushan discovered that the courser is actually a nocturnal bird!

the Jerdon's Courser from the BNHS posters and description, but shikaris' tales have to be taken with a pinch of salt! However, sifting the evidence carefully, Bhushan felt that in three instances the leads were promising.

Pichchanna, a Yaanadi in the Siddavatam area (Cuddapah), identified the bird as *kalivikodi* and described its call as a single note, 'soft and very sad.' Near the Penakucheria Dam site (Anantpur), the local name *kalyaniguvva* vividly depicted the bird as a strutting bridegroom with garlands, and the third possibility was the bird called *chitti-pollika*, in the Rapur forest range (Nellore).

Bhushan's own spot checks in these areas were without luck. He also asked the shikaris to keep a sharp look-out for the Courser during their outings, and to let him know if anything interesting turned up.

Aitanna operated in the scrub forests on the Lankamalai hills near Sid-

stood motionless in the beam of the torch. Aitanna had run quickly and picked it up — it had been as simple as that!

The shikari knew how to look after wild birds, and he was most dejected when, a few days later, his unique catch died. He was persuaded to take Bhushan along that night to try and trap another specimen. But, although a pair was sighted on three occasions and clearly identified, neither could be caught.

"It will take a long time to investigate the present range and status of the species," said J.C. Daniel, Curator of the BNHS. "That may entail trapping and ringing the birds for identification. And if all goes well, we may perhaps think of a captive breeding project to release birds into suitable habitats, so that the species has a better chance of survival."

And with that end in view, Bhushan has returned to the wilderness on his trusty motor-bike.

Pratap Saraiya