Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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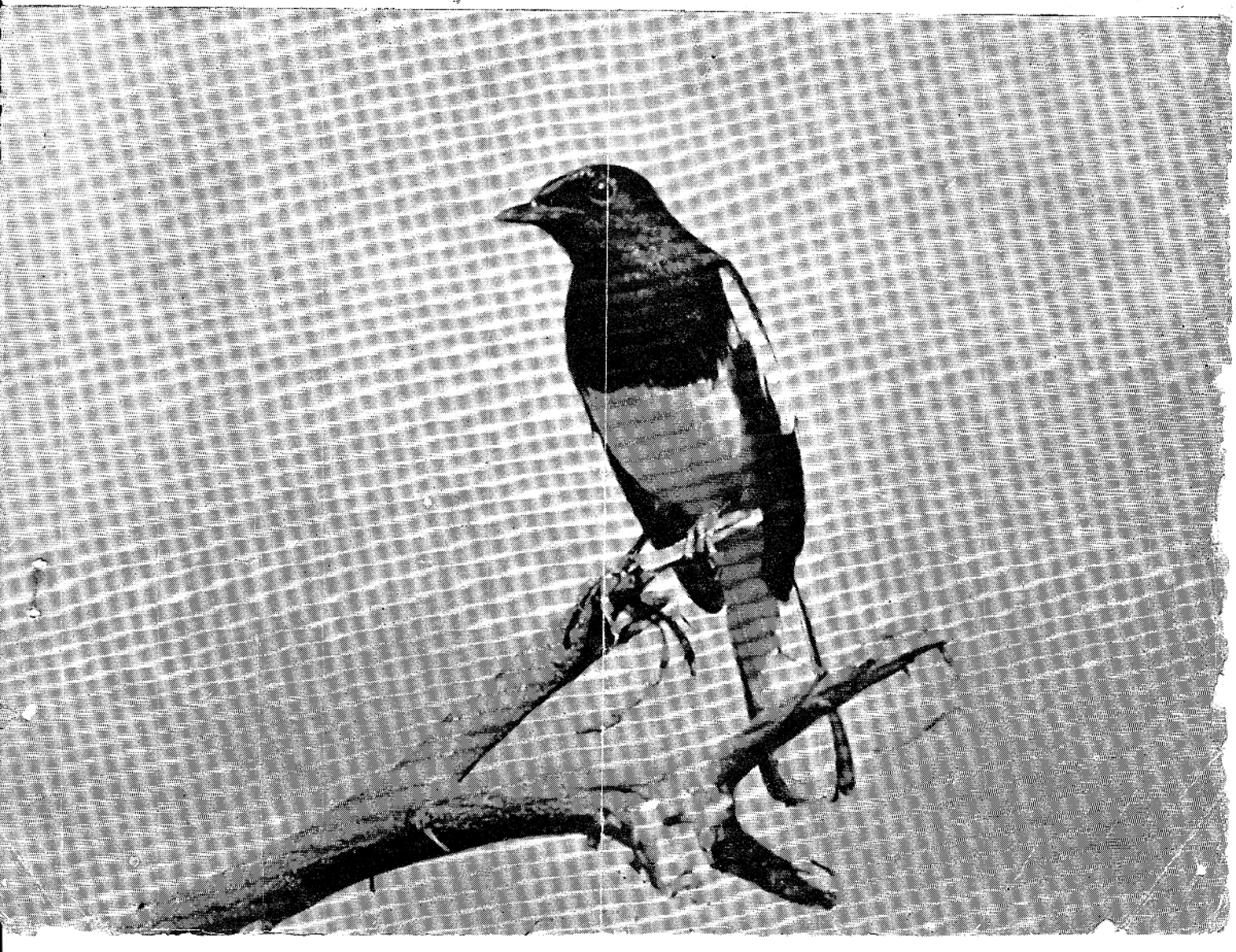

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N E W S L E T T E R F O R
B I R D W A T C H E R S

Volume XVIII No.1 January 1978

Contents

The K K Surendran prize

We start the new year (for which good wishes to all our readers) on a happy note. Shri K K Surendran who was formerly a research assistant at the Bombay Natural History Society has offered a prize of Rs.100/- for the best article published in 1978. It is another twelve months before the onerous responsibility of selecting the "best" article descends on the shoulders of the editor. Meanwhile it will be a help if readers can suggest a few guidelines for the selection.

Symposium on Ecology & Conservation II by Zafar Futehally

In the last issue of the Newsletter I mentioned that at the Symposium on the Ecology and Conservation of birds and mammals held in Bangalore in Nov,77 several interesting papers on birds were presented. I dealt with a few in the past issue and will continue in the same vein.

V.C. Ambedkar, as was to be expected, presented a paper on weaver birds which is his speciality. He says "During the field study in the Kumaon terai in August 1974, I came across a very unusual breeding colony on a lofty tree Mitragyna parviflora (Rubiaceae) where there were nearly half the nests of abnormal forms. Looking at the colony I was impelled immediately to study the causes, if any, for such large abnormality. There were in all 186 nests comprising both normal and abnormal, with total number of 326 egg-chambers. Moreover, there were 55 half-finished nests for accomodating unmated females. I observed a six-storeyed nest one below the other whose total length was 160 cms. i.e. 5 feet and 3 inches. Eleven nests forming a composite unit fused with each other.

In all 46 birds were ringed with coloured rings in addition to the aluminium rings of the Bombay Natural History Society.

It was observed that the hyperstructures to the normal nests were added by the original builder. In composite unit, three males were observed to be building their nests. These nests were actually fused together to form a single structure. In one case, where two nests were in physical contact, they were occupied by two different females.

A snake Ptyas mycosus was frequently found to be visiting the colony regularly to devour eggs and young.

It is suggested that predation, polygamy, played an important role in the formation of abnormal nests. A large compact giant structure seems probably to be a measure to divert attention of the predator, thereby saving,

to some extent, late born young. Probably it is also a solution to the shortage of nest sites.

Priya Davidar presented a most interesting paper on the plant parasite Loranthus and its host plants in the Nilgiris. She was trying to assess among other things the host selectivity of the Loranthus and feels that the dispersal agent, namely the Flowerpecker could play an important part in determining the host species. It is unfortunate in a way from the point of view of the Conservationist, that because Eucalyptus sheds its bark rapidly the Loranthus cannot get a foothold on this exotic plant, which has certainly no place in the midst of our natural forests.

P.Kannan spoke about the nectar feeding adaptation of flower birds and described the general charactaristics of the 37 species of Bombay. They are of two types according to Kannan: non specialised nectar feeders with licking type of bill and tongue, and specialised nectar feeders with suctoral bill and tongue. "Of the nine species of nectar feeders studied, only sunbirds combine the most highly evolved structural adaptations for nectar-feeding (resulting need of nectar) with the ability to make use of the nectar of the largest number of flowers, including those not adapted to receive their visits.

The short-cut method of nectar feeding is a behavioural adaptation of high selective value which has possibly enabled sunbirds to develop highly evolved bill and tongue for nectar feeding and has compensated for the evolutionary ill effects of high specialization to a relatively narrow food niche."

M. Krishnan discussed the availability of nesting materials and nesting sites as a vital factor in the gregarious nesting of Indian Water Birds. There are certain instinctive urges and preferences determining the choice of nesting sites and trees or other plants. There are factors like insulation by water and other protective potential of the nesting site: There are physiological factors significant for getting the birds into breeding condition; the survival value of congested nesting; the versatality and the choice of nesting sites and plants; the utilisation of the nests for raising successive broods during each nesting season and the replenishment of the nest and the lining material. There are specific considerations like the need for thorny twigs as the foundation of the nest construction and the availability of less thorny twigs and lining material, mainly green leaf for the inner lining. The author is of the view that the lack of adequate and natural supply of nesting materials is a likely cause for the abandoning of old nesting sites and the deterioration of waterbird sanctuaries in India.

to be continued

Water birds in the Indian desert by Indira Kumar Sharma & B.D. Rana

Perrennial rain-pools and tanks are scarce in the Indian desert. However, bird-watching at one such site was conducted for three days during October 1977 at Gaddisar tank close to Jaisalmer. The water spread area of the tank is about 500 x 300 meters. Aquatic weeds in the tank are Chara sp, Scirpus spp and Vallisneria spiralis etc. The skipper frog Rana cynophlvetis is abundant, preyed upon by many birds.

35 Little grebes (Podiceps ruficollis)were sighted swimming and diving in the middle of the tank and the frogs were war y of them. The Grebes were observed flying to the other side on noticing the hoverring of a Pale harrier (Circus macrourus). Four Grey ducks (Anas poecillorhyncha) were found swimming in the middle of the tank or resting at an island of the tank. A pair of common Kingfishers (Alcedo atthis) was noted on a bush at the island.

The island was about 15 x 10 meters having a medium size 'Khejara' tree (Prosopis cineraria) and the old tomb with a dense growth-of aquatic weeds around the island. There was the nest of the Spoonbill (Platalea leucorodia) on the tree, usually 11 Spoonbills were seen perching there and another on the shore. Surprisingly, one Peacock (Pavo cristatus) used to be seen there in the morning, resting under the roof of the tomb. About 17 Redwattled lapwings (Vanellus indicus) were observed at the island and their 4 young chicks probably, the Lapwings collected there for breeding, being secured against stray dogs and cats around the shore. Six Blackwinged stilts (Himantopus himantopus), 5 Common Sandpiper (Tringa hypolleucos) and 8 Little Stint (Calidris minutus) were sighted on the island, either picking food or resting. These birds were also noted on the shores of the Tank. Four Coots (Fulica atra) were occasionally seen at the island.

On the other shore of the tank, 15 Blackwinge stilts, 5 Little egrets (Egr-etta garzetta), one Grey heron (Ardea cinearea), two Cattle-egrets (Bubuleus ibis) and four Pond herons (Ardeola gravii) were also observed.

On the far shore about 7 Pariah kites (Gyps bengalensis) and five Scavanger vultures (Neophron percnopterus) were observed sitting for hours, having perhaps come for a drink.

A pair of Rollers (Coracias bengalensis) and four Hoopoes (Upupa epops) were sighted moving around the shore in search of insects, food. A large number of the Green bee-eater (Merops orientalis) were seen hunting insects in thickets of Prosopis juliflora trees growing around the tank. In the morning and evening many House-swifts (Apus affinus) were seen performing acrobatics over the tank, their nests were located under roofs of tombs.

A large number of House crows (Corvus splendens) were found hunting water insects, molluscas and frogs on the shores. Similarly a large number of pigeons(Columba livia). A number of the Common sandgrouse (Pterocles exustus) ranging 5 to 14 (mode was 5 and 7) were observed arriving at the tank from 8.55 a.m. to 9.50 a.m.,the peak timing was 9.15 a.m. to 9.30 a.m.

We explored some more tanks also in the desert, which were comparatively smaller. The Redwattled lapwing, the Little egret, the Blackwinged stilt, and the Little stint were observed at every tank. The Spoonbill, the Grey duck and other water birds were found at large tanks only, but the Little grebe was found at medium size tanks also. It is noteworthy that the house crow was observed on the shores of tanks in fair number close to villages and towns. It haunts the tanks to take frogs fishes and other water animals.

Extracts from a letter by Aamir Ali

You had specially asked me to send you a full report on the Seychelles and Nairobi and so here you are.

The Seychelles are just what you dream about, and imagine as a "South Sea Island". It is something like Hawaii and Fiji and so on must have been like a couple of hundred years ago. And I am afraid that the Seychelles, too, will get spoilt and ruined very quickly, because they are already attracting hordes of tourists. All the hotels were full, the facilities strained, under the weight of the tourists. Several new hotels are under construction.

Victoria, the capital on Mahe Island, is a very small town: you can walk from one end to the other in ten minutes.

The Island is lush and green and thickly wooded, with a few well hidden villages. The coast is partly rocky and partly sandy beaches (the tourist pamphlet said there were 68 sandy beaches on Mahe) and the water is clear and lovely to swim in. The thing to do is to hire a car and drive around yourself, visiting different beaches. Unfortunately, all cars available for hire were already rented out, so we had to be content with a taxi.

The ferry service to Praslin Is. was also very crowded so we hired a motor-boat for one day with two attendants and had a glorious time. We went across to Cousin Is. Besides Mr. Lloyd, the manager, there are four Seychellois resident on the Island. We asked if we could land and were told we needed a permit in order to do so. I said I knew Mr. Lloyd personally (which of course I did not), so they went and asked him. He came down himself and

came alongside in a small boat. I said I brought him greetings from Salim Ali etc. and finally Lloyd allowed us to come ashore and took us round for an hour or so. It was a fascinating visit. Thousands of nests - Bharatpur style - of lesser and common noddies, fairey terns, tropic birds, and others. Also the famous Brush warbler-Lloyd estimated them were about 50 of them left. Also saw one of the few remaining Seychellois tortoises. I enclose a copy of a leaflet which visitors are given and which you will find interesting. A certain Mr. Thorpe was also visiting the Is. for a few days, and he knew Salim very well, sent his greetings. He was on his way to Japan for a meeting and was going to stop for a week on Cousin Is., on the way back as well.

We went on to Praslin Is. and visited the famous Vallee de Mai, where the huge coco de mer grow. These are fantastic trees. It is not only the size of the trees which is impressive but the size of the leaves - I would say about 10 or 15 meters in height. Even a slight breeze makes a terrific rustling of the leaves.

There is an overwhelming feeling that the attractiveness of the Seychelles is not going to last long. All the tourists, including us, were busy saying that we wanted to see it before it was spoilt by tourists. The government claims to be very conscious of the need to preserve the natural beauty of the islands, but howlong will they be able to fight against big monied interests?

Kenya was another fascination. It is a naturalists paradise. I dont think that the wealth of bird and animal life is particularly more exciting than that of India, but it is so much accessible and visible. Certainly, for the casual tourist, there is no comparison.

It seems to me that there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the tourist arrangements are excellent and very highly developed. Dozens of agencies, all ready with excellent cars, mini buses, or land rovers to take you to a hundred different places. Excellent, luxurious, lodges and hotels in the National Parks. Secondly, the nature of the terrain and vegetation makes animals much more visible. The land is flat and thinly forested - scrub, mostly. So you can see long distances and as you drive around you are seldom more than five minutes without seeing something. We spent about three hours in the Nairobi National Park, (about fifteen minutes from the centre of town) and a day in the Tsavo Park (we had a 3 hour drive in a land rover in the after noon). We saw scores of elephants, giraffes, zebras, gerenuks, ostriches. Also saw several rhinos, hippos. And one leopard. Lions on two occasions.

The bird life too was a wonder. In India, though I know practically nothing about birds, I can on most occasions at least hazard a guess as to the family to which a bird belongs. In Kenya it all seemed new and strange. With the

help of a book and some questions, we got to know a few of the commoner birds: starlings (superb, and gold fronted): weaver birds, hornbills (Yellowbilled and redbilled), maribou stork, Egyptian geese, herons, sunbirds, and so on.

Incidentally, one bird observation on the Seychelles: There were no crows or Pariah kites at all. Also, now I think back, perhaps no sparrows. A small turtle dove seemed to fill their place and was always around in built up areas.

Rare Kestrel numbers up (Courtesy World Wildlife News Summer 1977)

The Mauritius kestrel, probably the rarest bird of prey in the world, has increased its numbers to 13 following the successful fledging of five young.

David Mckelvey, who is working for conservation of the kestrels (Falco punctatus) with support from the World Wildlife Fund reports that he had the good fortune to witness one of the fledglings take to the air for the first time. The nest was three quarters of the way up a rocky outcrop, and the parent birds visited it and then coursed back and forth along the cliff face.

The adults drifted away to the west across a wide valley, calling shrilly. In a few minutes I suddenly saw a third kestrel emerge from the hole and fly strongly out over the ravine. It then faltered and tried to soar, giving the impression that this business of flying was all very new. Regaining its sense of direction it returned to the cliff and rather ungracefully alighted in a thick shrub above the nest hole.

"The following morning I saw not only one but three fine, perfectly-feathered young, a bit shorter tailed than their parents, flying near the cliff face against a bright blue sky."

A second nest on an inaccessible ledge producing two young.

Hunting and destruction of their forest habitat have brought the kestrel to the brink of extinction, along with attacks on their nests by monkeys after eggs and young. Successful reproduction has only been achieved in the last few years when the birds chose nest sites which the monkeys could not get at. Preparations had been made to guard vulnerable nests.

Attempts are being made to breed the kestrel in captivity in Mauritius, so far without success, although the scientists involved remain optimistic, based on success in captive breeding of falcons elsewhere.

Correspondence

Dr. Miss. Hamida Saiduzzafar

This is with reference to the article on "chronological time-sense in birds" by A. Navarro in the Newsletter of November 1977.

In my compound I have had occasion to observe a Crimson-breasted Barbet (Megalaima haemacephala) roosting every night in a disused angled metal piple. My notes indicate that the time at which the bird goes into the pipe at night and the time at which it emerges every morning can be timed to the minute. I have been observing it off and on for the last six years, and I have found that its timing varies most exactly according to the length of the days at different seasons. For example, I noted on 20-9-71 that it went to roost at 6.20 p.m., and emerged the next morning at 6.15 a.m., and in September 1977, the timing was almost exactly the same on the corresponding dates. Roosting times of other birds, e.g. Redstart (Phoenicurus ochruros), which is a winter visitor here, have been similarly recorded and found to be startlingly accurate, varying slightly with the length of the days and nights. The evening roosting time can usually be related very closely to the sound of the "Zazaan" which is clearly heard in my house.

Birds on my Verandah 16' x 9'

Mrs. Indira Kohli

Three munias have built a nest in a rose climber outside my drawing room. The nest is flush with a window pane. From. Dr. Salim Ali's Book of Indian Birds I have identified them as the Uroloncha punctulata (Linnaeus). I have observed there is a distinct method in the apparent madness of a munia's nest! The straws are carefully looped in a figure of 8 and the eggs are laid in the bowl of each loop. The lower bowl now contains four eggs and the upper one, three eggs. I have never seen four munias together in the nest; obviously the male has two wives. The birds fly in and out of the nest through a side hole which gives access to both chambers. The females do not sit on the eggs all the time.

I am not an ornithologist, but I know I am in a position to observe facts that would be of interest to ornithologists if only I knew what to look for!

In addition to the munias, a pair of sparrows have made a nest in a wicker-work lampshade on my verandah. Swallows (wire tailed) have built a mud nest on the wall of the same verandah. The sparrows keep trying to break the swallows nest whenever it is left unguarded. Two more sparrows had built a nest in a flower pot of ferns on this verandah. Their eggs have hatched

and the little ones are now learning to fly. Three more munias have built a nest in another rose climber over the porch near the verandah. A pair of birds which I have not yet been able to identify (blakish-brown bodies, reddish and white chests, size of Myna), have started building a nest in a wicker work standard lamp on the same varandah.

The birds are not frightened of me, and they live in reasonable harmony with each other. Whenever I have the time I sit on the verandah and watch their antics.

Would ornithologists who are interested in any particular aspect of the behaviour of any of these birds please write and let me know?

B.A. Palkhiwalla

Lately, when I had been to Tarapore, I enjoyed watching some of our common birds like Hoopoes, Golden oriole, Sandpipers, Redvented bulbuls, Common mynas, Palm swifts, House swifts and Common Bee-eater.

However, I could not identify a dark grey bird which came to our dining table every afternoon to pick up some leftover food. The bird was the size of a Common myna, dark grey all over and was very quiet. When I described this bird to our friend Serrao at the BNHS, he said it could be the Malabar whistling thrush. I am not sure if it could be this one, as it does not tally with the birds description in Dr. Salim Ali's Handbook of Indian birds.

Interaction of a Redwattled Lapwing & a Dog

R.K. Bhatnagar

Recently on 25-5-75 while passing beside the lawn of our library at about 14.30 hrs, I happened to watch the interaction of a lapwing and a dog. The Lapwing was behaving in a dare devil manner and did not mind the approach of the straggling dog within the hedge boundry of the lawn. But as the dog approached further the Lapwing started emitting a loud Tit tit tui tit t-ui t-ui. Only after driving out the dog did she calm down. A closer search of the vicinity revealed a crude nest with 4 eggs in the bush. Obviously the bird was protecting its nest.

An instance of Common myna feeding on wall-lizard

Manjit Singh Dhindsa

On 10th August 1977, at about 1.30 p.m. a common myna (Acridotheres tristis

linn) was seen hunting a wall lizard (Hemidactylus flaviviridis) in the bathroom of Boys Hostel Number 7, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana (Punjab). The mynas, usually in a group of four or five, were seen visiting the same bathroom a few times earlier also, but the purpose of their visit was not understood. On the above mentioned day, one myna was observed catching a wall lizard by the tail in its beak. The lizard immediately shed off its tail and escaped. The myna swallowed the wriggling tail at once and flew out of the bathroom through a broken window pane. Perhaps the bird was disturbed by the arrival of the birdwatcher and did not try to catch the escaping lizard again. Though the common myna has been reported to be an omnivorous feeder, this, instance of the bird feeding on wall lizard is quite interesting and of biological significance. As far as the author knows, this type of feeding habit of common myna has not been reported earlier.

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