Newsletter for Birdwatchers

40th Anniversary Issue

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Editorial

Life begins at forty: Here at last is the much announced 40th Anniversary issue of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

In an earlier Editorial, I had said that this issue could become a treasure of the past millennium. Whether this is so is for the readers to decide, but I would like to specially thank the people who have written for this issue. These articles provide pleasure and education, not merely about birds, but about the related field of conservation - and of course the two cannot be separated. Lavkumar Khacher is always pragmatic, and so he has written about the importance of nest boxes, to compensate for the natural nesting niches which we have destroyed; Prakash Gole has had so many exciting encounters that it is difficult to single out any one for comment. But, for him the main thrill is to discover the purpose and the meaning of the biodiversity around him, and this is the function of the true ecologist. Aasheesh Pittie, a careful recorder of facts, and of the changing nomenclature, has naturally been overwhelmed by the sighting of an "extinct" bird. Daniel Wesley cannot forget the Loten's sunbird with its maroon crimson breast-band, and its presence in a new location.

Lt. General Nanda's account of the Alexandrine parakeet in the Andamans is extraordinary. What is it which makes a bird, after regaining its freedom return to its erstwhile captors. Obviously memories of the imprisonment must not be entirely unhappy. Mrs. Pragati Nayak must be complimented for conveying the joy of being surrounded by even common birds - but seeing 30 Indian lorikeets (now renamed vernal hanging parrot) must be a rare thrill. Salim Ali says in his Handbook that groups of over 50 have been seen. V. Santharam, who has the eyes of a hawk, sees over 24 species from the verandah of the Forest Rest House at Siruvani, in Kerala. How marvellous that such places exist in our country. Perhaps they should not be publicised. Otherwise they will get eroded by over-use.

Kumar Ghorpade obviously enjoys the natural scene both scientifically and emotionally, and his extensive reference material is always a help to the Editor. SG Neginhal discovered the nesting colonies of the painted storks and grey pelicans at Kokrebellur. He is a good example of a timber extracting forester turned conservationist. Dr. J.C. Uttangi, at 84, does not give up, and what better message for the rest of us. Ameen Ahmed, a physiotherapist, is a great campaigner for the saving of our natural areas through his nature club in Tumkur, Karnataka. Anish Andheria's article is of special interest to the Editor for obvious reasons. It is such a pleasure to learn that the "bend" in Borivili still exists. I was there with Andheria on 23rd November and was delighted to see the forest still in its pristine condition. Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh belongs to a genre of Army Officers who have used their postings in remote areas to indulge in natural history, and his writings have been looked forward to.

Like Prakash Gole, Abdul Jamil Urfi cannot home in on a single experience, so he has taken refuge in the people who have been his mentors.

Theodore Baskaran writes about that elegant bird the yellow-throated bulbul. I think it was in 1987 that we went with Richard Fitter and his wife Maisie to the Nandi Hills. Richard had a good view of a solitary bird, and after returning home he browsed for over an hour on the reference books I had, and then announced that the bird he saw was the yellow-throated bulbul. SV Nilakanta, who edited the Newsletter for a brief period while I was shifting from Bombay to Bangalore in 1973,

writes about that truly regal bird the white-bellied sea eagle. How lucky that he saw the birds with snakes in their talons.

Peter Jackson may be unknown to some of the recent entrants of the NL but in its early years he delighted readers with his writings. As Chairman of the Cat Specialist Group of IUCN he has done significant work in the field and from his desk in Switzerland to save the tiger. He was one of Salim Ali's closest friends, and was with him in the field very often.

Abraham Verghese and companion P. Subramaniam write that the experience of a kingfisher evolving into a snake has got "etched in our minds". Readers too will remember it for a long time.

Madhav Gadgil, as a boy of 14, noticed a common green bee-eater with missing pin feathers in its tail. This habit of careful observation has made him a leading ecologist of our time.

S. Rangaswami surprises one with his passion for birds and conservation. The Home Study Course in Ornithology is a remarkable achievement.

S. Sridhar recounts his memorable encounters with flycatchers.

Finally I come to my three relations, brother-in-law Aamir Ali (International Civil Servant, author and authority on Shakespeare, mountaineer), Zahida Whitaker, (teacher, author, an authority on reptiles), and elder daughter Shama Chowdhury Futehally (lecturer, author and literary critic). I have placed these three at the end so that I am not accused of the undesirable, but well established culture of nepotism in the human species. I am beholden to Zahida for suggesting strategies for avoiding being caught out in the field - and possibly being removed as Editor.

Birds are my Life

LAVKUMAR KHACHER,646, Vastunirman, Gandhinagar, Gujarat 382 002

The Newsletter completes forty years! This in itself is a tribute to some of the amateur birdwatchers of the first half of the century. It speaks volumes of the confidence we had to speak to government and to have dreams for the future, confidence in the future. How else can this sort of publication come out regularly? What is more, how marvellous it is to want a lively birthday of sorts! This special Newsletter should go out as a challenge to the younger generation to take over the responsibility. I was 29 at the time we got together to consider how best birders could communicate freely among themselves and more so to share the absolute joy of birdwatching.

What was the most exciting experience I had in the world of birds? It is so very, very difficult to choose - my first male golden oriole in an amaltas tree in full bloom? The first Indian pitta flicking leaves among sundappled shade of trees on a hot summer day? The flash of blue as my first grandala flew past as I toiled up towards the Rohtang Pass against a vicious blizzard force wind? The fearlessness of a pair of robin accentors feeding a nest load of young in a low *Caragana* clump on the Tibetan Plateau? I could go on like this to fill page upon page since birds have been interwoven in my life and seeking them has been the driving force that has sent me to exciting locations and to ensure that they continue to thrive. This has been the underscoring purpose of my single-minded approach to conservation.

To single out one most exciting experience would be very difficult if not impossible. And yet, yes, there is one very exciting event which has given me great joy and satisfaction and that is the designing of nest boxes and putting them up - I have had them immediately occupied by Indian robins, magpie robins, brahminy mynas, a pair of hoopoes and a pool in a garden I developed in Ahmedabad had whistling teal laying a dozen eggs! I am now designing nest boxes for Indian rollers, spotted owlets, roseringed and blossom-headed parakeets and most ambitious for a pair of nakta and the whistling teal which sadly lost the eggs among shrubbery to one of the monitors. Incidentally, the hoopoes have been unfailingly raising young for the last ten years, the others raise more than one brood each year.

A Tryst with Jerdon's Courser *Cursorius bitorquatus* (Blyth)

AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545, Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, India.

Aitanna would hear none of it. He had to attend the wedding in the neighbouring village and the *Kalivi Kodi* would simply have to wait for another night. A hired truck waited ominously ready to carry the wedding party and Aitanna away from Reddipalle. After some more cajoling, he said that the batteries of his miner's lamp were discharged. We had four-celled torches. He couldn't find the rattle that distracted the bird. We were willing to take that risk. As his resolve broke, I asked Richard to step out of the car and told Aitanna that he'd come all the way from England to see this bird. Would he have to return disappointed? Aitanna's self-esteem would not allow that to happen.

Aitanna led us into the pitch-black night, warning us not to switch on lights or talk. Our pavement-friendly feet had problems negotiating invisible stones and sudden depressions. But the heart pounded with anticipation and eyes strained after the dancing torch beam that Aitanna flicked haphazardly here and there. Two hours of this and we were trudging hopelessly. Then it happened. The needle glinted in the haystack! *Cursorius bitorquatus* crouched on its long legs and stared at us with its abnormally large nocturnal eyes. All our torches found their target. With bated breath we crept forward, afraid to blink lest the apparition vanish. A brilliant white supercilium separated its scalp from the face and neck and a double line necklace adorned its chest. We stood transfixed. As Richard reached for his sketchpad, Aitanna, the conscientious forest guard, motioned us away. It took us a while to get back our breath, as we sat in silence, lost in thought. We had just seen the rarest bird in India, on one of the oldest geological real estates in the country, indeed the world. As I realized that this terrestrial endemic had survived here for more years than our imagination allows us to register - and now faced an uncertain future - time stood still.

A Gentle Throb

PRAKASH GOLE, 1B, 'Abhimanshree' Society, Pashan Road, Pune 411 008

What could be my most exciting experience in the world of birds? If you had asked me this question, dear Editor, twenty years ago, the answer could have been easy. Then I could have easily recalled the discovery of a red-tailed buzzard *Buteo rufinus* nest on a high ledge in Ladakh with the redoubtable Salim Ali himself cheering me as I went up the cliff face to reach the nest. Or I could have written about the day when, after an almost ten-hour search, the nest of the blacknecked crane suddenly materialized before me as I climbed up a sand dune and looked down into a marshy pool. Or I could have once again lived through the discovery of the new winter home of this same crane in Arunachal Pradesh. All these are treasured moments in my life!

But quarter of a century later, as one advances in age and experience the same world of birds, it takes on a different colour and affects your senses differently. The thrill and stimulation of finding a strange bird in stranger surroundings are still welcome, but the mind craves for something deeper, something that satisfies your urge to know more. I sensed this feeling first when studying the sarus in the Keoladeo NP. I saw a foraging sarus nonchalantly stealing an egg by dislodging an incubating little brown dove (or is it laughing dove? Certainly not a moment to laugh for this poor creature) from its nest. How human, I thought! A glimpse in a bird's life, a flash illuminating his character, a lighted pin prick in the world of nature, struck a chord somewhere deep within me.

The sense of wonder and even awe overpowers me when I am thrown before a multitude of birds and asked to make some sense out of it. Initially one is bamboozled by the sheer diversity and speed of movement of this conglomeration. But as one's observations proceed, the jigsaw puzzle begins to fall in place and a picture slowly emerges. This has happened to me more than once. First in Western Ghats when the absence and presence of certain bird species indicated the fragility of the eco-system that straddles the Ghat crestline. This region, when disturbed, suffers doubly. Its original inhabitants disappear and birds from other locales cannot colonize this region. The eco-system is fragile as it suffers on both counts and would take an inordinately long time to recover. Hence the immediate need to protect the crestline of the Ghat!

Again when you study the varied bird life of our wetlands including the sea coast, an examination of their movements and habitat-use suddenly lights up a vista and gives you an insight into the deeper ecological processes that trigger the mobile world of birds. It is this sudden revelation that moves my spirit and fulfills the urge to know more of the complex world of nature. The throb of excitement is gentle but also transcendental!

Exciting Encounter with Loten's Sunbird

PROF. H. DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinganagar, Tiruchirapalli 620 017

To want me to write on one of my most exciting experiences in the world of birds is a clever tweezers on my cranial vault. To choose one, leaving out my first infantile killing of a male purple-rumped sunbird in a citrus tree, or tickell's flower peckers for immediate feasting by roasting them under the same jujube tree, the rearing of pet red-vented bulbuls, common mynas and rose-ringed parakeets in improvised cages, the 'manufacturing' of globular mud shots etc., a gun not to be in the hands of children of noble professions, at the expense of home work and studies is to be a great judge. I depend on choice by lot for choosing my most exciting experience with birds. The choise fell on Loten's sunbird.

It was on 21 May 1973 I was at the Seethalakshmi Achi College for Women at Pallathur about eight miles from Karaikudi (10.1°N 78.8° E) and about fifty miles from Tiruchirapalli (10.8°8N 78.7°E) as an examiner of the Madurai Kamaraj University in practical Zoology. For the three days I had to be there I was accommodated at a huge mansion of a house with decorated ceilings and cornices in colourful splendour, marbled and mosaic floors, the walls as slippery and shining as the nacreous interior of a molluscan shell. Must I say encomiums about the sumptuous, wholesome and satiable meals on leaves as long and broad as the dining table itself!

Looking out of the laboratory in the direction of a chirping call coming from hibiscus and ixora bushes in flowers, I saw for the first time, a fully moulted male Loten's sunbird arguing, turning this way and that, with another male, which I, then, believed was a female, in eclipse plumage much like that of the purple sunbird and sipping nectar from the flowers. I was tolerated within ten feet of them. One followed the other on the wing apparently contesting and delineating the territory. I had the least inkling that I would encounter another dame at Tiruchirapalli from August the same year. On 9 September 1974 I typed out a note to Dr. Salim Ali, telling him that mine was a new record for the area south of Madras. Pat came the reply, 24 September 1974, on behalf of him from Mr. J.C. Daniel suggesting that I look up JBNHS Vols 44 & 45. On 5 October 1975 as my luck would have it, I had another exciting encounter with a fully moulted male caught sleeping on a low mango twig in a relation's house in Trivandrum (8.5° N 76.9° E). The bird, endemic to South India, continues to interest and alert me by its presence or absence in the places I happen to be, and tickles me to find answers to the questions as to its root and place of origin and range extension. Have I got the answers? Yes I hope, at least not much off the mark!

Sunday Morning Spent in my Backyard

PRAGATI NAYAK, "Aashirwad", Sampe, P.O. Aryapu, Puttur Taluk, D.K. 574 210

I woke to the sweet whistles of the magpie-robin and the twanging cries of the racket-tailed drongo. I eagerly stepped out into the garden at seven a.m. A tree beyond our garden wall was simply swarming with lorikeets. I love to watch these birds walk about the tree instead of flying from branch to branch like other birds do.

As I approached the huge "golimara" tree behind the house, I saw several birds flying like tiny triangular kites and behaving like bee-eaters. I came closer to find a whole flock of chestnut-headed bee-eaters hunting. Though I had seen these birds near the house before, this was the first time I saw such a flock of them together.

I sat down on a log to view the bee-eaters properly when my attention was distracted by the sight of a small green barbet at eye-level on a tree. How beautiful its green plumage is! A bright yellow bird flew to sit with the bee-eaters - the elusive black-headed oriole!

Small twitterings and cheeps attracted my attention and I turned and saw a tiny black-headed bird at first mistaking it to be a sunbird. Through my binoculars I could see that it had a thick bill and its wings were dark brown - a black-headed munia! Suddenly another appeared and then another until a flock of about nine birds had gathered on the telegraph wire in a row. A racket-tailed drongo appeared and they flew off.

I got up and two spotted doves flew off as I approached and settled on a telegraph wire beyond the fence. Oh, what a sight! Birds of different species were sitting together on the wire - apart from the doves, there were two red-whiskered bulbuls, two magpie robins, a small green barbet, a white-breasted kingfisher and a small green bee-eater!

Indian robins hopped about among the logs. A golden-backed woodpecker cackled in the distance. The towit-towit of tailor birds and the chreep-chreep of green chloropsis filled the air.

I moved back to the house. The lorikeet tree still had lorikeets in it. Unfortunately the noisy jungle babblers arrived just then and soon the lorikeets were zooming out of the tree - two, three, four, six, eight, ten .... I counted thirty in all!

It was half past eight when I returned home.

An Afternoon with Birds at Siruvani

V. SANTHARAM, Rishi Valley Bird Preserve, Rishi Valley 517 352, Chittoor Dist., Andhra Pradesh

One of the finest sites for birdwatching, relaxation and breath-taking scenery in the Western Ghats is the Siruvani Reserve Forest, a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Located conveniently close to Coimbatore it is spread over both Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Siruvani Dam which meets the drinking water requirements of Coimbatore city is in the Kerala part of the reserve. There is a dramatic change in the vegetation as one drives along the narrow lantana- bordered forest road from Tamil nadu to Kerala. The scrub-bamboo-moist deciduous forest in the eastern slopes

of the hills give way to grassland-shola (evergreen) forest in the west.

Although I have made about five visits to these forests, I particularly recall one trip in late January 1995. We camped at the lovely old Forest Rest House at Pattiyar which offers some of the best views of the countryside. Perched at the edge of a Shola on a hillock at an elevation of some 3000 ft, it overlooks the reservoir and the escarpments rising to an elevation of some 6000 ft on the opposite bank. The hill slopes covered with dense forest and grasslands and a cascading waterfall also offer fine opportunities to view wildlife even while sipping a hot cup of tea from the spacious verandah of the rest house. It was from here we had observed herds of elephants, wild boar, otters, sambhar, dholes or wild dogs (pursuing a sambhar family consisting of a stag, a doe and a fawn), civets, ruddy-mongoose besides Nilgiri langur, Malabar giant squirrels and bonnet macaques.

In the patch of tall grass in front of the rest house we saw an adult lesser coucal and a juvenile (?) which had some whitish spots on its tail, head and neck. Nearby was a noisy flock of rufous babblers, foraging on the ground. The fruiting *Ficus* next to the rest house attracted several small green barbets, a pair of crimsonthroated barbets engaged in courtship feeding and mating and a small flock of bluewinged parakeets. Flocks of hill mynas flew past, shrieking as children returning home after school. From the edge of the water, below us, came the three-noted calls of the brownheaded storkbilled kingfisher. An osprey splashed into the waters in pursuit of a fish.

On a shola tree behind the rest house, sat a solitary Nilgiri wood pigeon, bobbing up its head on seeing us. A fairly large flock of 15-20 Wynaad laughing thrushes were rummaging through the leaf-littered forest floor, accompanied by their loud chattering notes. From the lantana thickets along the road came the clear calls of the elusive greyheaded bulbul which sounded like 'Kreench kreench'. Despite efforts to locate them we could get just a brief glimpse of a bird. A shikra-like bird on a tree, when closely examined, turned out to be a large hawk-cuckoo, a "new" bird for me. As it flew, a few minutes later, a few other smaller birds also got fooled by its appearance and responded by giving alarm calls and diving for cover!

A black eagle sailed silently through the forest canopy and a pair of crested serpent eagles were circling overhead. On a roadside tree, a pair of crested honey buzzards were mating. A heartspotted woodpecker pecked loudly from a dead branch of a tree. I was hopeful of sighting the great black woodpecker but was disappointed. A Nilgiri verditer flycatcher was sallying for insects from its perch.

Three whitebellied treepies were kicking up a racket as they shifted perches between trees. An emerald dove flashed past in great hurry low across our path and disappeared in the thick undergrowth. Small sunbirds were flitting amongst a flowering bush and a little spiderhunter with its extraordinary long beak put in a brief appearance.

The churring noises in the undergrowth gave their identities away and as if to confirm our identification, a blackheaded babbler glared at us for a brief second before diving again into the thickets. At a stream that gurgled beneath a bridge, its banks overgrown with weeds and shrubs, we heard the unmistakable long drawn calls of a Malabar whistling thrush. A few minutes of patient wait was rewarded by its song — the school boy whistles — rendered heartily as if to entertain us.

It was now time to get back. The sun had disappeared behind the hills and the western skies were a riot of colours — crimson, pink and golden. As we scanned the 'finger' of the reservoir, we noticed small groups of large cormorants and a couple of darters flying low over water to their roosts. A dabchick dived as if to escape being hit by these dark 'missiles'. A shaheen falcon put on a special appearance as it dashed after a few swifts that had gathered quite some distance away.

The grey junglefowl was calling it a day and a pitta joined in with a clear, loud double-noted call. It was answered by two others from a little distance away. Darkness was slowly enveloping us and the evening was cool. Soon the clear velvety sky revealed its first star. From the grassy patch a jungle nightjar called. Dhonk! A sambhar was giving out its alarm call from across the reservoir. Our day was made. Tomorrow will be yet another day and with more exciting birds to see, we thought.

Life's Feathery Excitements

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My first pair of field-glasses (binoculars), a Yashica 8 × 30 which was brought for me from Japan by my father, enhanced my bird watching skills, with help from a growing library. The discovery of an almost complete set of volumes of the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* in the library of the Agricultural College in Bangalore which I had joined for my bachelor's degree, after a pre-degree science course in Poona, started me off on enlightening bibliographic pursuits. This very *Newsletter,* plus several other journals and books which opened their pages to me and entered my brain, was, and still is, a very heady but healthy exercise.

Personalities whom I have had the pleasure of getting to know, and interact with, after Krishnan took me by the finger out of the 'cradle' and into Alice's Wonderland, were Salim Ali,

Zafar Futehally and recently, Humayun Abdulali. I regret not having met Biswamoy Biswas, E.P. Gee, Jamal Ara and Dharmakumarsinhji, but that fascinating autobiography by Salim Ali, "The Fall of a Sparrow" (not Petronia!), made up, partly, for this irreparable loss. Besides books and bird watchers, my first experiences of some of the more awe-inspiring geographical areas in our country were critical in sustaining and elevating my ornithological pursuits.

Readers may be curious to know the names of birds which excited me on their first sightings. A quick list should suffice to satisfy — Blyth's reed warbler (the 'chuck-chuck bird' as I know it, my first 'official' field notebook entry, made on 6 January 1963), the Indian robin (our absolute peninsular endemic, genus and species, and a great sight and sound), iora (melodious to say the least), pitta (colourful, but also superbly 'invisible' from front or back views in the right setting and pose), male white paradise flycatcher (in flight with long tail streaming behind), fantail flycatchers (charming, with tails like the fan-tailed pigeons I had as pets), lesser pied kingfisher (stunning aerial dive into water for fish), black and orange flycatcher (both bold and beautiful), wryneck (camouflage expert extraordinary), Tickell's blue flycatcher (a gorgeous gentleman), king vulture (a stately character on a carcass in a jungle), Indian courser (with the most wonderful legs, pearly white and fast!), kestrel (hovercraft *par excellence*), lammargeier or bearded vulture (soaring over Himalayan crags like a king surveying his domain), shaheen falcon (in breathtaking serial plunge after feathered prey), night heron (*not* a 'Bittern', like an apparition in deep jungle), Malabar crested lark (with a regal crest and its musical sorties into the air a real performance), snow pigeon (in flocks flapping through the Himalayan mist), fairy bluebirds (fabulous sight on a liana in forest), racquet- tailed drongo (black is beautiful, with a splendid tail and great mimicry), rufous woodpecker (excavating its nest in that of a tree ant), great Indian bustard (impressive size and demeanour, and which to my grandfather used to be mouth-watering meat in a sandwich!), and finally, but not even remotely completely, one of my most beautiful of Himalayan birds, the white-capped redstart atop a rock in the midst of a flowing mountain stream. Waiting for migrants to arrive, along with the North-east Monsoon, is another annual pursuit of pleasure, least of all.

Birding Recollections

S.G. NEGINHAL, I.F.S. (Retd.), 643, 9th Main, 2nd Cross, 3rd Stage, 3rd Block, Basaveswaranagar, Bangalore 560 079

Professionally I started my career as a forester, which offered opportunities to study plants, birds and wildlife. My amateurish articles published in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* during 1970-71 were seen by my conservator, who deputed me to undergo wildlife management. On return I was posted to look after sanctuaries around Mysore.

I had to go to Bangalore often on official work. Once in April 1976, I sighted a congregation of painted storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*) at the desiccating tank of Rudrakshipura. A fisherman in his loincloth was their companion. On seeing these birds my birding instinct suggested that there should be some unreported heronry nearby. But I had no time to investigate, as I had to proceed to Bangalore to attend a meeting.

The next day I returned to Rudrakshipura. Alas, the painted storks had disappeared. In nature lost opportunities rarely return. Any way I did not give up. I jeeped along a dusty village road, by the side of the tank. After covering about 16 kms I came to a sleepy hamlet, over which a number of painted storks were hovering. On entering the village I found hundreds of painted storks nesting on trees growing on the precincts and backyards of the villagers. To my joy I saw the unbelievable. The endangered spotbilled or grey pelicans (*Pelecanus philippensis*) were also nesting along with the painted storks on some *Ficus* trees. I had stumbled upon a gold-mine of breeding colonies of grey pelicans, not reported so far in Karnataka. The discovery made world news, and soon bird-lovers commenced to flock to the village. It was a golden discovery for anybody to be proud of.

In May 1976 my luck returned. I had gone to the Ranibennur Blackbuck Sanctuary for a day's visit. While reconnoitering the sanctuary I came across a nest of the great Indian bustard (*Choriotis nigriceps*) having one large egg. I had the honour of locating and photographing it for the first time in Karnataka.

There are other exciting birding days to recollect, which I put down for avi-faunal records.

In 1994-95 Dr Deodhar and Mrs Madhuri Deodhar took me to the Naregal tank, near Haveri in North Karnataka, to show the barheaded goose (*Anser indicus*) floating on still waters in hundreds along with other wintering birds like the comb duck, ruddy shelduck, pintail, pochards, godwits, garganeys, wigeons, curlews etc. And lo! flamingos (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) were there standing in hundreds. I am yet to see such large congregations of wintering birds in one place in South India.

Recently I was destined to locate a great black woodpecker (*Dryocopus javensis*) pecking for grubs on a dead standing tree in the forests of Sunkadakatte (Nagarahole N.P.). I was overjoyed to see this species after 30 years.

Birdwatching Aspirations during Bygone Days at Dharwad

Dr J.C. UTTANGI, 36 Mission Compound, Dharwad 580 001

I was 10 years old in 1926 and my uncle a Drawing Teacher, in the Mission High School at Dharwad, was stuffing birds required for museums. By keeping in touch with him, I learnt the names of several birds, especially in the pheasant, grouse, partridge and quail, duck and teal, pigeon, crane, geese, wader and snipe families. During the thirties I was a biology student in Karnataka College. There were no guides or guide-books except the two volumes of Fauna of British India. However my aspirations to find a guide continued. During the forties I was on the staff of the same college and arranged to get a copy of the fourth edition of Salim Ali's Book of Indian Birds. The conservation ethics and birdwatching pursuits had not yet made headway and hunting of birds and other forms of wild species revolved then under what was termed as 'Sport Hunting.

For many years a member of the migratory Indian pitta regularly appeared in the same corner of our college botanical garden and it was a beauty to watch its hopping movements during feeding. It stopped visiting after 1960. A group of 4-5 Malabar pied hornbill was always seen feeding in the banyan trees near the Mission Compound during the thirties and forties.

The real explosion of interest in birdwatching and the sport of bird-listing took off only after the Centenary year of the Bombay Natural History Society was celebrated in the year 1983. The launching of the Asian One Day Midwinter Waterfowl census by the IWRB in the year 1987 onwards, was a great stimulant.

Birds reign supreme and their all-round study in recent decades has helped to promote wildlife conservation and care of the environment. Since birds remain threatened almost everywhere our battle should be against the continuing habitat destruction.

I rode over rough roads in the countryside for the sake of just seeing one more bird and this spirit has kept me rejoicing and fit. I will be 84 years in the year 2000.

An Historic Observation of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana

PETER JACKSON, 1172, Bougy, Switzerland

Only seven minutes after I entered my hide, the pheasant-tailed jacana returned to its floating nest on the calm waters of the Anchar lake in the Vale of Kashmir. It was a great moment. Several times I had spent days crouched in hides, watching through a small hole as jacanas delicately "walked on the water", their elongated toes supporting them on the broad leaves of the water lilies, but always out of range of my camera, never returning to their nests. They flew around uttering their mewing calls, which haunted me. I had despaired of photographing this beautiful bird, with its chocolate brown and white body plumage, white head and breast and yellow nape, and a long curved tail. I had to keep trying. My shikari, Sultana, located yet another nest and over three days moved my hide closer and closer until it was just three metres away.

It was July 1959, and in those days a large format camera was considered essential for good bird photographs. I had equipped myself with a Linhof Technika, which could be focussed with an image on a ground-glass screen, making it possible to compose the picture. The jacana performed as I desired. It returned to the nest from the left, re-arranged its four chocolate brown, pointed eggs and brooded, moved off and returned from the right. Then it began to pull at the lily leaves a short distance further away from the hide, presumably feeding on insects. I joyfully snapped picture after picture, until I decided that enough was enough.

For a last shot; I waited until the jacana approached the nest. My finger was on the trigger as I tensely waited for the bird to get into a good position. To my astonishment, it leaned over the nest, lowered its head, and pulled one of the eggs into the water. It backed away, tapping the floating egg along with its bill. It moved to the spot where I thought it had been feeding and nudged the egg onto a pad it had constructed of lily leaves. Then it returned to collect the remaining eggs, one by one, and floated them safely to the new nest.

It had long been known that jacanas built second nests and moved their eggs. The late Colonel Boyle had photographed one carrying an egg under its throat (also on the Anchar Lake), but no one was known to have actually witnessed eggs being floated to another nest. Obviously, I was taking historic photos, but it was not easy. My Linhof was perfect for static photography, but far from adapted to this situation. I had to put a dark slide in the film magazine before removing it from the back of the camera; replace it with the ground-glass screen; open the lens; decide where the bird and egg would be when I had carried out the operation in reverse, focus on the spot, and then set up the camera again. Six times I went through the complicated procedure until my film was finished. I got out of the hide and waded to the shore, breathing deeply and with a sense of accomplishment.

It was a tense time, waiting for the films to be processed, but, at last, I had the photos of this extraordinary event. I sent copies and an account to Salim Ali at BNHS. In due course, he included the record in the Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan Vol. 2 (p. 200)

Reminiscences of a Birdwatcher

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The year was 1976. We were in our senior Masters programme. Dr. P. Subramaniam [now an accomplished scientist in the US] and I were then interested in the nidification of birds especially hole nesters. I had by then studied the nesting of the crimson breasted barbet (Newsletter for Birdwatchers, 1975, 15 (2) : 1- 3). So, when we spied the 'fishy' movements of a whitebreasted kingfisher, we knew it was up to some sort of 'perpetuation of its own kind' activity. Our hunch was correct, for, we now on its trail, found it darting straight into a hole in a mud bank in the ravines of the old campus of Agricultural College, Hebbal, Bangalore. From then on began our regular visits to the nest armed with pad, binoculars and a torch. The last mentioned was to take a quick peep into the nest during the non-incubating phase, when the incubating bird left the hole.

It was a thoroughly absorbing pastime for both of us. The eggs hatched and soon our torch beam caught a pair of lovely chicks. We retreated soon, lest we disturb the parents. Our minds pictured an additional two kingfishers screeching and hunting insects in the campus, once these chicks grew.

A day after the chicks hatched, we were there again at the site. We sighted the parents outside. So, Subramaniam carefully made his way to the nest and shone the torch. He seemed to peer almost into the hole. He then called me to take a look as he could not make out how the chick developed such a weird look. So, I took hold of the torch and peered. The 'chick' indeed looked weird. Slowly it moved and in full view of the torch light I saw the clear head of a snake! As we backed out it slithered to the entrance of the hole, and confirmed our worst fears that it had eaten the chicks.

We were disappointed, but we knew that's how life exists [or doesn't] in nature. This, however, was one bird watching experience that deeply got etched in our minds.

Missing Tail Feathers of Common Green Bee-eater

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I was born and brought up in a house that was then on the edge of Pune city. Around our house were jowar fields and guava orchards. Close by lay the well wooded campus of Prabhat Film Company and the Hanuman - Vetal hills. Birds were aplenty and luckily my father was interested in them. So in our house we had a pair of binoculars and books by Gilbert White and T.C. Jerdon, Hugh Whistler and Salim Ali. I used to greatly enjoy watching the birds settled on the electric wire that ran from the pole to the corner of my study. My favourites were the little green bee- eaters, with their iridescent plumages. I was charmed by their aerial sallies showing off the outstretched tail with its long, pointed central tail feathers.

One day, I noticed a bee-eater missing the elongated tail feathers. I was puzzled, and looked through all our bird books. There seemed to be no mention of such a creature. Was it by chance a different species, thought that seemed unlikely. My father too, had no explanation to offer. But he was a member of the Bombay Natural History Society where worked the great Salim Ali. So I wrote to him of my puzzle. Within days I was delighted to receive a reply complimenting me on my observation and clarifying that bee-eaters lose the elongated tail feathers during their annual moult made me realise that first hand observation could possibly yield new facts. That was the beginning of my serious interest in studies of the natural world, which led me twenty years later to co-authoring a paper with Salim Ali himself on communal roosting behaviour of the Indian birds. This paper included notes on the sociable little green bee-eaters as well, groups of 20-30 of whom I had enjoyed watching sitting huddled together on electric wires on many a misty winter mornings.

Birding in a Kerala Rainforest

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It was early November and the sky was free of haze in this southern part of Kerala bordering Tamil Nadu. It seemed strange, as the road from Punalur to Tenmalai showed no signs of the battering it had received by the monsoon over the past few months. All along the journey I was accompanied by the whistles of orioles (*Oriolus* sp) and the mimicry of the greater racket tailed drongo *(Dicrurus paradiseus*). I rode my two wheeler amidst the unending chain of the picturesque Western Ghats, till Tenmalai, the headquarters of Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary.

As I entered the Sanctuary the plantations gave way to teak plantations on the banks of the Kallar river. A few curves ahead and I was in the very heart of an evergreen forest. As I was winding my way up a sharp curve, a yellow coloured bird the size of a bulbul, forced me to park my two-wheeler beside the road. As I scrambled for my field glasses, two more birds of the same variety joined the earlier one. By the time I could confirm them as yellow browed bulbuls (*Hypsipetes indicus*), my attention was drawn towards a female paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) being chased by a male. Just above these two birds was a greater racket tailed drongo, in hot pursuit of some insects. It seemed I had chanced upon a bird wave/mixed hunting party. Amidst this, a flock of jungle babblers (*Turdoides striatus*) moved around noisily.

I was yet to come to terms with this wonderful congregation, when a flock of scarlet minivets (*Pericrocotus flammeus*) brought brightness to this dark evergreen jungle. Just when my attention was drawn to the overhead metallic noise of an Indian treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), I heard the flapping of some big birds. A few metres ahead were a pair of Malabar grey hornbills (*Tockus griseus*) easily identified by the absence of casque over their bills. All told this was my most memorable experience till today.

An Assembly of Indian Robins

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We do not have it any more. It was a nine by twelve inch print of a Hebbar painting, oil on canvas.

I get reminded of this print ever so often on sighting or listening to birds. The left edge of the frame was a dark brown, solid trunk of a tree, one slender branch reached diagonally across the frame in the upper half, perched on the branch in the left upper quarter of the frame was a bird, the size and colouration of an Indian robin, its tail cocked up, beak pointing skywards and its breast filled out in song. Lying flat on the ground, head pillowed against the tree trunk, legs drawn up at the knees, one hand on chin and looking up at the bird was the primitive man with an expression of innocent wonderment. Hebbar called it, "The Birth of Poetry".

In the animal kingdom, the most memorable is always the sudden, surprise encounter. So it was, on a miserably cold, cold winter morning, ground vegetation damp with night fog and man and beast still "shut in byre and hearth" nursing the chill in their bone-marrow. I was walking through stony waste, fallow fields and ridges covered by scrub and lantana patches. As I crested a ridge, as though on cue, there errupted from all around me the most pleasing bird song.

There were several Indian robins, males and females, flighting through scrub and hopping on lantana branches all around. Right ahead, perched on the pinnacle of a bush was a cock Indian robin putting out a most trilling solo performance. Facing the sun he poured his heart out for the sheer joy of singing. Every time he fluffed his chest to bellow his song, just for that brief moment the sun also played on his throat, chest and upper abdomen imparting a magnificient indigo-blue-black glint. As though catching breath in-between notes, there would occur a slight shift in his profile. With the pouring out of each note, his wings would relax, the primaries slightly arching in a fan revealing the white patch on his shoulder so very distinctly. At the climax of the song note as though to signal the ultimate in ecstasy and exuberance or of physical effort, I know not which, his tail would jerk up just beyond the right angle and in that instant also reveal the most brilliant brunette-brown-orange flash of his vent. The tail then oscillated downwards, its outer edges fanning out a bit towards the tail tip. This display spanned just a few minutes but they were moments of eternity in auditory and visual pleasure and of a certain spiritual sensation.

No doubt that my vision had focused on this one cock Indian robin but the performers were no fewer than a respectable philharmonic orchestra. Admittedly all of them were not collectively on open display but they were there for sure; singing, twittering, trilling, hopping from branch to branch to bush and down to the ground but never ceasing in their song.

Again, as on cue, the song ceased in a flash. Millisecond of a discernible pause and many an Indian robin flushed into flight. I counted seven but there were several more of them. They were gone. The Hebbar print is gone too. But the image and the song of the Indian robin shall survive.

People I was Associated with

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I must confess that I find it difficult to separate my most exciting experiences in the world of birds from memories of people/places/events I was associated with. As happens, my most exciting experiences are also the earliest ones. In 1977 I was an awkward teen-ager sent from my home in Delhi to Aligarh Muslim University to study medicine. But something else happened at Aligarh which made me choose a different course of action; I came under the influence of birdwatchers and in due course developed a totally new perspective on my favourite subject, Zoology.

When I was an undergraduate, Asad Rafi Rahmani was a research scholar in zoology, pursuing a Ph.D. on the olfactory organs of fishes. Since I was already initiated into birding, getting associated with him took no time. I have several happy memories of my close interactions with Rahmani Bhai, including writing my first article for the *Newsletter* — on the birdlife of Narora barrage, under his guidance. (This article also elicited a query from the editor, prompting us to do some extra homework later on). Among the thrilling field excursions we made together was a cycling trip to Sekha jheel to observe the behavior of birds on a solar eclipse day. While returning to Aligarh we saw a lovely pale harrier perched on a tree top. The harrier eyed us calmly as we dismounted from our bikes and while Rahmani Bhai changed lenses on his newly acquired camera, it flew away suddenly, when at last the camera was ready to function.

Another birdwatcher with whom I had the privilege to be associated with was the late Professor (Dr.) Hamida Saiduszaffar. It was at her house that I met Salim Ali for the first time, when he had come to Aligarh to screen his film on bird migration. Dr Hamida encouraged me to publish my checklist of the birds of Aligarh and in 1983 when the BNHS organized its centenary seminar she asked me to go in her place — all registration expenses paid. This historic seminar was an eye opener, as many other youngsters who participated in it will agree, and but for her sponsorship I might not have been able to attend it.

After Aligarh I went back to Delhi. An exciting event during this period was an invitation to participate in the National Sarus Crane survey organized by Prakash Gole. We travelled in the interiors of UP and Haryana, on small country roads, looking for sarus and other wetland birds. It was very exciting then and now it all seems just romantic.

My first real training in scientific ornithology was under John Goss-Custard with whom I worked as a post-doctoral student at Furzebrook Research Station in South England in 1993-94. I consider those years very educative because John imparted all types of training — not only how to record bird observations and do statistical analysis on the computer but also on seemingly unimportant things such as how to use a motor powered boat, to shout for help when stuck in the muddy waters of the Exe estuary, tie sailors knots etc. I remember sitting in a cozy country pub with the oystercatcher study group, discussing how we would wish to die. John's idea of dying was the most imaginative. He said that he wanted to die in a hide with his eyes fixed on the red evening sky and a flock of geese flying on the horizon. John G-C, readers may be interested in knowing, is alive and well and still building elaborate models of bird populations.

In Search of a Bulbul

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Devarayadurga, 80 km from Bangalore, is a rocky outcrop, strewn with ruins of ramparts and clothed in thorny scrub jungle. One early morning, after having spent the night in the rest house there, we were walking down when a movement in a bush caught our eyes. We went closer and sat. After a few minutes the bird popped up and sat on top of the bush. We drew our breath in as we instantly recognized it as the yellow-throated bulbul. Though none in our group had seen one earlier, there was no mistaking. The bright yellow head and neck, the typical movements of a bulbul and the call were distinct.

Among the birdwatchers of Bangalore, the yellow-throated bulbul had been in the news for a few months. The Birdwatchers' Field Club had launched a survey for this bird. Groups of birders have been going in different directions in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka to locate the habitats.

In 1939, during the survey of Mysore area, Salim Ali had observed this bird and there has not been much notice since then. It was this fact that motivated the Bangalore birders to go looking for this bird. When a team led by Dr Subramanya of Bangalore went to the same spot from which Salim Ali had collected his specimens, Thondebavi hills, they drew a blank. But reports started coming from other parts. In the forests around Sangam — where river Kaveri and Arkavathi merge — these bulbuls have been spotted. On a trek up the Nandi hills some birders spotted this bird. In Horsely hills in Andhra also they were sighted in considerable numbers. All the sightings were reported in *The Newsletter.*

The yellow-throated bulbul is easily identified. It is the size of a bulbul, but the upper throat is bright yellow and the eyes are red, with a distinct line around them. The bill is black and the legs slaty blue. This bird is endemic to southern Andhra, East Karnataka and North Tamil Nadu. It means it is specially adapted to the area to which it is confined. When a bird is endemic, it is very vulnerable to habitat destruction and can easily be wiped out. When you realise this and set your eyes on a yellow-throated bulbul, you are struck by a sense of awe and wonder. If this bird disappears it would not only mean that we have lost one form of habitat but that a unique life form, what nature had honed for eons, is gone forever.

Whitebellied Sea Eagle

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Many years ago, there was a lofty casuarina tree about 250 yards to the west of my house. A pair of whitebellied sea eagles (*Haliaeetus leucogaster)* had built a huge nest about 15 feet from the top of this tree.

I lived with my parents in the first floor of this house in the Theosophical Society, Adyar. I had an uninterrupted view of the eagles' nest with the aid of a badly worn out terrestrial telescope (magnification15) which was propped up with books on a window sill.

As my school had been shifted to Rishi Valley, I was taught by various tutors. Most of my lessons were outdoors. One of my tutors taught me to make a clinometer. The hollow stem of a papaya leaf was tied to a tin protractor to which a pendulum made of a string and stone was attached. By sighting through this tube, the angle of elevation of this nest could be measured. These observations were drawn to scale and we arrived at a figure of 80 feet from the ground.

Most mornings, the sea eagles made a tremendous racket with their loud honking sound, which could be heard across the Adyar River even in Greenways Road.

They used to sail out to sea with slow wing-beats followed by a glide with wings held in an open 'V'. The sea was hardly a mile away and they would return with sea snakes in their talons. The ground below their nest was strewn with white skeletons of sea snakes.

Although the nest was large, about 6 ft in diameter, they never tired of adding to it. They often broke off, with a loud report, dead branches from an ancient mahogany tree next to my house.

A few years later, in September 1933, Annie Besant died. Soon after that, some people who objected to the loud honking of the birds got the casuarina tree cut by callous professional managers of the garden. The sea eagles and I parted company.

In Response to the Editorial, "Round the Bend in Borivili" (NLBW, 39(4), 1999)

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I was going through the editorial "Round the Bend in Borivili", regarding your birding experience at the Borivili National Park, Mumbai, in the 1960's (the park is now called the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP)). The immaculate description of the bend leading to the Vihar Lake has encouraged me to add a piece myself. I give a brief account of the birdlife of that very place, which will assure readers that in these three decades, apart from the name, nothing much has really changed.

I have been repeatedly visiting this area since 1985 and the birdlife is still as diverse. On one such visit a fortnight ago (29th August 1999), at the very bend, I saw a nesting pair of the threetoed kingfisher *Ceyx erithacus* shuttling between the adjoining valley and their nest, built on the mountain slope to the right. I spent half an hour observing these vibrantly colored birds bring an assortment of insects and spiders for their gluttonous chicks. While witnessing them guilelessly executing their parental duty, I caught sight of the racket-tailed drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus* and the Alexandrine parakeet

Psittacuia eupatria atop a nearby haldu *Adina cordifolia*, soaking their feathers in the early morning light. Calls of the black-headed oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, brown-headed barbet *Megalaima zeylanica*, coppersmith barbet *Megalaima haemacephala* and spotted babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps* reverberated across the valley. A large cuckoo shrike *Coracina macei* glided overhead only to disappear in the valley below. Flocks of little egret *Egretta garzetta* and little cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger* headed for the lake for an early morning feast. As I descended to the stream, at the base of the slope, I was blessed with an enthralling spectacle of a tightly packed cluster of nearly 40 great orange-tip butterflies *Hebomoia glaucippe* sipping nutrients from the rain-soaked soil. Up above, numerous black kites *Milvus migrans* soared in customary smooth circles slowly gaining height for a panoramic view of the forest beneath. Whereas a distant cousin of the kite — the Eurasian hobby *Falco subbuteo,* jetted across a mango tree probably in pursuit of a winged arthropod.

Birdwatchers across the country have been reiterating slogans concerning the degradation of our natural wealth. Although their apprehension is understandable, there is no reason to get too pessimistic about the fate of wildlife in India. Mumbai is undoubtedly one of the most populated and polluted cities in India, and if, the three-toed kingfisher and the hobby have survived in the heart of such a busy metropolis, we surely need to re-evaluate our speculations about their future. On comparing my observations with the Editor's thirty-year old notes, I am forced to say that we have largely underestimated the hardiness of our co-inhabitants. For ..., amidst the growing pollution, population and persecution, the Bend, the evergreen forest, the jamun and the karanj, along with a plethora of life forms still exist in their full glory! If we extend adequate protection to the remaining forest pockets like the SGNP, I am convinced that these wonderful denizens possess the requisite potential to outlast our predictions.

Shwegay of the Ruby Wings

Lt. Gen. B.C. NANDA, Hebbetagiri, K. Nidugane P.O., Madikeri, Kodagu 571 201

In my long association with birds, none has lived on in my memory as has an Alexandrine parakeet that I met as a child.

My father was in the forest service stationed in the Andaman Islands and 1937 found us living on Long Island in the middle Andaman Group. One day a Burman forester named Mongee, who worked under my father, brought us a little bamboo basket. In the basket was a little Alexandrine parakeet that Mongee had named Shwegay. In Burmese Shwegay means Ruby and the name was apt since the bird had red patches on his wings that were truly ruby coloured.

Little Shwegay was barely learning how to fly and his wings had been clipped. He crouched terrified in his basket. My sister and I introduced him to our home and he soon adapted himself and learnt to deal with a household that included two bull terriers and two cats. We decided that he should not have a cage but only a perch and as he gained confidence he began to waddle around the house with the clumsy ungainly gait of a parrot. As his boldness grew, he even had the inpudence to eat off the dog's bowls while they were feeding. Needless to say he did not test the tolerance of the cats the same way!

In time he regained his plumage and learnt how to fly. He would sit on his perch and call to the flights of parakeets that came to sit on the trees near the house and then one day he flew off and joined one such flight. We were convinced that we would never see him again, but a few days later he returned home. Shwegay stayed with us for a few days more and then once more returned to the freedom of the skies.

Many months later, we had given up all hope of ever seeing Shwegay again, when a flock of parakeets came once more to our garden. My sister and I went out and called to Shwegay in the off chance that he would be with this particular group of birds. We called again and again and suddenly a fully grown male bird fluttered down from the trees and came to rest on our window sill. We wondered at the beauty of this bird that had grown into maturity in our home and then returned to the wild skies where he belonged. Shwegay was resplendent in the glorious plumage of his kind. We offered him a chilli which he ate and then flew away never to return.

Many years have passed since then but the memory of beautiful Shwegay is as vivid in my mind as the day he spread his wings and soared into the blue sky.

My Affinity for Verditer Flycatchers

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Of the 198 species (migrants and residents) we have in Rishi Valley, I have a special affinity for the verditer flycatcher for more than one reason. A pair of these birds arrive in Rishi Valley in early November, usually during 2nd to 4th, from their Himalayan haunts and leave by mid-February next. During the years 1991 to 1994 there was some predictability

about the date, time and spot of their arrival. In subsequent years, the grey drongos whose numbers are increasing, have been harassing the verditer flycatchers with their innate truculence.

The sojourn of the verditer flycatchers in Rishi Valley during 1991-1992 remains memorable. On 3rd November 1991, around 1 pm I was taking a chance and was waiting in front of the Guest House with my binoculars ready hoping that the verditer flycatchers might arrive. A Norwegian lady visitor joined me on knowing the reasons for my waiting. We were getting impatient and wanted to leave but to our astonishment one verditer flycatcher landed on the top of a tamarind tree some 20 feet away. Soon another landed. The birds tried to catch some insects in the air and within three or four minutes disappeared into the dense canopy of a large peepal close by. That very night a resident called me saying a tiny bird had taken refuge in his house and wanted me to take it away. When I went to his house I found that it was one of the verditers which got wounded at the base of its left-wing. It must have been the work of the grey drongo. I brought the bird home, and gave it a night's rest in a small cardboard box with soft lining. The next morning I found the bird looking all right but for its drooping left-wing. I tried to give it a few tiny bits of insect meat. It refused to accept. I found the bird losing strength. I rushed to the nearby Madanapalle town and got a few photographs taken of the bird. These are still with me. I just thought of preserving its skin and got the dissection box ready, but didn't have the heart to tamper with the bird, though dead. I got it buried and also got a sturdy bird bath constructed on the spot. Every year I find a verditer flycatcher flitting about on occasions near this spot. Has this any meaning? I do not know! I dare not guess!

Within days I located the roosting site of the other bird and observed its pre-roost behaviour carefully. It would arrive 20 minutes before sunset, perch on top of a cassia tree nearby and forage for some five minutes. (Perch No.1). Then it would move to another tree closer to the roosting spot and repeat the performance for another five minutes (Perch No.2). This over, the bird would suddenly disappear into the neem nearby with a dense canopy-its roosting spot. I observed the steadiness of this pre-roost behaviour over some ten days and then I thought others should also be given the benefit of observing this pattern of behaviour. Every day, 6 to 8 visitors - students, staff and visitors - would be called by prior appointment to watch this spectacle. Mr. Friedrich Grohe, a Swiss national, who has a cottage of his own very close to this spot, also joined once. He was so impressed by what he saw that then and there he gifted his powerful mini binoculars to me. After 10 days I stopped this daily drama in order to leave the bird in peace and also pursue our studies of the behaviour of this bird uninterruptedly. The fame the bird earned for me that year lasts till this day. Students and staff enquire about its arrival and movements as if I am an authority on this species.

The conflict between the grey drongos and the verditer flycatchers goes on and is the subject of an ongoing study. Gone are the days when we could predict their movements. To the drongos it may be fun. But the verditers are not the ones to be intimidated. They have "flint" in their souls, as Mathew Arnold said of John Keats, the poet. They know the relevance and validity of the saying *"Adapt or perish"*.

Memorable Encounters with Tickell's Blue Flycatchers

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A flash of blue and orange betrayed the presence of a bulbul sized bird as it dashed in front of us and settled in a nest; a natural cavity in a tamarind tree in the Bannerghatta National Park, Bangalore. It watched us nonchalantly with its bright eyes and shiny azure blue forehead.

Among the many rewarding studies this surreal picture of the flycatcher at nest with its striking appearance remains deeply etched in my mind. The handsome, symmetrical and agile bird seen that hot mid-May morning in 1987 was none other than Tickell's blue flycatcher (*Muscicapa tickelliae*); a central riveting icon indeed!

A shaft of light briefly illuminated the nest cavity. The settings were very singular, exactly twelve years ago and it turned out to be the finest morning in that finest and unforgettable year. Looking back now, I may reckon it as the finest hour too.

I very well remember that day how the flycatcher was first noticed by Mr. Milind Desai and soon after we discovered its nest in the circumstances described above. Another nest of the Tickell's blue flycatcher built in a similar fashion, in Nandi Hills, 45 kms to the North of Bangalore had been located by me and Dr. Mallik some eight years earlier during a blazing summer afternoon. Altogether more than a dozen nests of the Tickell's blue flycatcher have been studied in detail by me and my birdwatching friends in the last one decade. One essential element in the exhilaration was the knowledge gained about these elegant birds and their breeding behaviour over the years.

It is a curious fact of nature that the male Tickell's blue flycatcher is brighter and more colourful than the female which is a shade duller. This is a brilliant environmental stratagem adopted to draw the attention of a potential predator away from the nest, when the female has to remain in the nest and incubate the eggs.

At one particular nest I had my camera focused and awaited the female to occupy the well hidden nest and resume incubation. The female was reluctant to approach the

nest for quite some time. The male hopped in front of me and perched midway between me and the nest, rendered a full throated song and kept me engaged with its song & antics of flitting about the bushes nearer me. The female took advantage of my temporary distraction and dashed to the nest in a jiffy to resume incubation.

This drama was repeated a couple of times with the brightly coloured male engaging my attention away from the nest, while the dull coloured female would dash to the nest whenever I was distracted, to incubate the eggs or tend her newly hatched chicks.

I had the ring side view of the operation of natural selection when the parents dutifully performed their brief but very crucial behaviour. Certainly, no birdwatcher should ever ignore as funcitonless - however trivial it may seem - any piece of behaviour which he or she has observed in a natural situation.

In Tickells' blue flycatcher, I had another rare privilege of observing and photographing the habit of the male bringing food to the female at nest, so that the eggs and the newly hatched chicks are kept constantly warmed, especially when the nest offered rudimentary shelter on a cold and rainy day following pre-monsoon showers.

Yet another significant feature of the Tickells' blue flycatcher was the immediate removal of egg shells by the parents. No sooner the chicks hatched, the parents took away the empty egg shells and dropped them at the edge of their territory. Niko Timbergen, the celebrated Nobel laureate of yesteryears, has clearly showed by experiments that egg shell removal is vital for keeping the nest camouflaged. He had also shown how predators discover nests and chicks more easily if empty shells, with their smell and white inside are carelesly left around the nest.

The nesting pair of Tickell's blue flycatchers at Bannerghatta were seen to be cheerful throughout the nesting period and the male rendered a few rousing songs, especially when the chicks were in the throes of exchanging their down feathers for flight features and were eagerly looking forward to the eleventh day of their hatching to fledge and lead an independent life. But two days prior to this momentous event, the rousing song of the male had ceased and I was greeted with the alarming calls of the agitated parents; a most probable indication of nest predation. My heart was in my mouth when I hastened my steps and gingely peeped into the nest. But, I uttered a sigh of relief on finding the three chicks alive and kicking in their nest.

I looked around to analyse the reasons for their pugnacious behaviour. I noticed a newly installed dark green metal box adjacent to the nesting tree and a freshly dug trench cutting along the very base of the tree on which the flycatchers nested. The trench was dug up to lay cables and an electric distribution box was installed by half a dozen workers on the previous day. But none of the workers seemed to have noticed the nest with the chicks or their very agitated parents even though the nest was at waist level from the ground and placed in the tree cavity which was just a metre away from the distribution box installed by them!

On that deleterious day, the parents were deterred from approaching the nest by the continuous digging & cable laying activities of the workers; save for an hour of the workers' lunch-break and siesta.

Luckily the flycatcher chicks were ready to fledge by the time the civil work resumed two days later. The chicks climbed up to the edge of the nest, one after the other and individually made their first ever hesistant but straight flight to a low bush. One chick took a clumsy jump and after a brief flight tumbled and fell to the ground. But soon regained its strength and reached the safety of a bush after some efforts, much to the relief of the anxious parents. The flycatchers were tirelessly calling and urging the chicks to take cover and reach safer zones of the canopy and the chicks were seen dutifully obeying their commands. I walked away jubiliantly towards my vehicle after witnessing the struggle for survival and the admirable traits of the Tickell's blue flycatcher family.

A Tale of Two Birds

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This is a story of two birds: the dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) and the wall creeper (*Tichodroma muraria*).

I had seen dippers a few times on our local river, the Versoix, within 15 minutes of our home, but I was anxious to see them in the mountains. As I was quite often in the mountains, I felt I should quite easily achieve this modest ambition, but the years passed without success. One day about 15 years ago, when I was walking along a mountain stream with my son Rafi, I said, 'I'm fed up looking for my dipper. Show me one.' Within two minutes he said, 'There's your dipper', and sure enough, there he was. Since then I've seen 'my' dipper several times at the same place.

Now for the wall creeper. About 20 years ago, I was walking with a friend in the valley of the Derborence - well known because about 200 years ago, a large chunk of mountain crashed down, eliminated a village and blocked access to the valley. The novelist Ramuz has written a novel about this; it was made into a film. Just next to our path, there was a small cliff, and I suddenly saw a flash of red. My first wall creeper.

As the years passed, the desire to see another grew quite frantic. Others saw them in the Jura and in the Alps, even just outside Geneva in winter. Though I assiduously examined whatever cliffs I came across, never a wall creeper did I see. My friend Richard in England, a fanatic bird watcher, was also

in pursuit of a wall creeper; strangely enough, it was missing from his Life List which was as long as your arm and longer. On his various visits to Switzerland, I spent three weekends with him, continuing our pursuit. We went specially to the Mont d'Or and the Creux de Van, both known haunts of the wall creeper. On two occasions we were accompanied by his son, an even more fanatic birder than his father, also desperately anxious to add the wall creeper to his list.

Richard and his son satisfied their ambitions by tracking down the elusive bird in Spain; I remained wall creeper-less.

In August this year, I was walking with Rafi in the Valaisan Alps above the lake Mauvoisin. 'Come on Rafi,' I said. 'You once showed me a dipper when I asked you to. Now, for Heaven's sake, show me a wall creeper.'

Five minutes later, he said, 'There you are, there's your wall creeper.' And sure enough, there he was; and there was that special catch in the throat you feel at moments of great excitement. He flew along the lakeside, then alighted on the cliffs just next to our path. Merged with the grey rock face when he was still, flashing a colourful red when he flickered from one stance to another. He let us watch him for a full 3-4 minutes before flashing a red farewell.

Misty Binoculars and other Strategies for Survival among Birdwatchers

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In our family, it was taken for granted that a normal person had to be interested - preferably passionately - in birds. While normal families went to the movies and had sunday barbecues, we went to Karnala or Borivli hoping to see and hear the calls of the shama and other rare birds. The night before the birding trip, binoculars were spit-polished, bird-books thumbed, small notebooks located and pencils sharpened. (For a true birder makes his/her List with a pencil, not a pen). Much to my secret chagrin, food was the last priority. "Make some sandwiches, Paul, for tomorrow morning", my mother would tell our cook. Paul believed that six people could survive on ten sandwiches .... but only I seemed to notice that we were being starved to death. The others were too preoccupied with calls and crests, vents and whiskers, bills and backs. If I were a bird I'd mind terribly, being taken apart like this, but I guess our avian friends have no choice.

Well, neither did I. I grew resigned to my fate. But going along was one thing - it could be done, at a pinch; the real difficulty lay in hiding one's ignorance. Often, a friend of my parents' - bird-friendly of course - would be along and I simply had to pretend a certain proficiency I did not possess. There was also our uncle Salim, who got very upset when you didn't recognize a call or identify a small dark silhouette about a thousand metres overhead. Another complicating factor for me was that my sister was a good birder. As a small kid she astonished a bird-group by identifying a black-winged kite. This was bad enough; but over the years my brother, who used to joke about blue-bottomed nitwits, defected. And the outside world assumed I was just as bird-savvy as the rest of them. A difficult situation ... Over the years however I developed certain survival tactics which I feel it is my duty to share, in case there are other non-birders like me who have the misfortune to be born into a birding community.

Number One, don't fight it (i.e. this whole birdwatching thing). It doesn't work. Birdwatchers are simply unable to understand that someone can be uninterested in seeing the nest of a blue-eyed caterwaul. Or walking ten miles in the (slim) hope of seeing an immature mud-slider. I don't think it's anything to do with intelligence because when you steer them away from birds (once in a while) they seem fairly okay. But when it comes to this, forget it. Just go with the flow.

Two : have your binoculars round your neck at all times. This is a useful talisman: it immediately makes you part of the club, establishes your identity as a birder. As the bird walk starts, twiddle the focus thing with a knowing, slightly puzzled air. The reason for this will be divulged later in this paper.

Three : If there's food along - and there usually is, for many birders like to eat - don't indicate any interest in it at all. Pretend you just don't care. Once in a while, even suggest it be left behind in the car. This is tough I know but it does create a good effect. There is bound to be someone who loudly vetoes the idea, probably the best birder in the group who doesn't have to resort to strategies like these. In fact my most vivid memory of uncle Salim is of his dismay when the cold coffee had been forgotten at home.

Four : Soon enough, the dreaded moment will come when a sorry brown object flies acorss the path or croaks from a tree, and the birders stop mesmerized and ask "What was that?" Binoculars go up, mouths fall open. Someone or the other will single you out for an opinion. *Don't give it*, because like truth, ignorance will out. You can blame your misty binocs - this is where the focus-twiddling is useful - or say you just got a flash, or glimpse. The untrained ignorant will immediately shout some name - some bird not found here or off migrating somewhere - and his grave is dug.

Five : Every now and then, snatch your binocs and glare piercingly at a tree. Squint, standing absolutely still for at least forty or fifty seconds. Then look dejected, and say "Oh, it's only

a babbler." Or parakeet, or other common species. This has a two-pronged effect. It tells the others that you know your stuff, and that you're above babblers and bulbuls. If you can use the Latin names instead, all the better. But don't overdo it. Once is plenty.

Six : Avoid going with the same birding group twice. Sooner or later one gets found out, and it isn't pleasant. Play it safe. And never, never go with just another person because then you've had it. I have been on the run from birding groups all my life because as Salim's grand-neice and our editor's daughter, people expect me to be an expert.

Seven : Quick thinking is a must. Just the other day I was asked the difference between the Palni and Nilgiri laughing thrush. "Oh, I'm not one of these nitpicky birdwatchers," I said. "But I can look it up for you." I managed to hide the fact that both thrushes are total strangers to me.

There are other strategies but since I've crossed the editor's word-limit already I'll stop: but only after adding my latest birding victory. Two years ago I was in the States. My hosts were friends of my father's and decided to take me birdwatching "as a special treat". They even lent me - ouch - a pair of superb binocs, recently cleaned. "Shall we take a picnic, David?" asked Mary. David looked apologetically at me. "Of course not. The last thing these bird-wallas think about is food." I smiled unhappily and off we went. We turned off the highway on to a dirt track which led to a lovely lake. Just then a group of noisy objects flew in and landed clumsily in front of us. "Isn't it a bit early for the Canada geese?" I asked David. They were both impressed. They hadn't seen the small Wildlife Department signboard we'd passed. I, on the other hand, had. So we come to Number Eight: keep your eyes peeled.

Birding in Kumaon

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In June of this year my sister Zai (the one who finds it hard to survive birdwatchers - please see pg. 96) and I decided to revisit the scene of a holiday which has remained a high point in our memories of childhood. At Kausani in the Kumaon hills, sometime in the sixties, we had our first encounter with snow peaks and pine forests, and it came to symbolise for us all the beauty that this world has to offer. And so, more than thirty years later, we collected our teenage children, hired a Tata Sumo, and put our faith in U.P. Govt. Tourism. (Incidentally, this last act of courage was very well rewarded.) Our fortnight began at Naini Tal and continued through Sitla (near Mukteshwar), Ranikhet, Kausani, Binsar and Naukuchiyatal.

On the 2nd of June, as we drove up to Naini Tal, the presence of the ubiquitous yellow-billed chough confirmed that we really were in the hills. So did the occasional turquoise flash of a verditer flycatcher. The next morning we climbed Cheena Peak on the outskirts of Naini Tal. It is a steep and rocky climb through magnificent oak and rhododendron forest, the kind with which we were to become familiar over the next few days. An occasional rhododendron was in startling red bloom and friends who live in the hills told us that these were unusually late blossoms. We also saw sprigs of wild roses, looking like the dog-roses of Victorian fiction. Jungle crows croaked all around us and a purple sunbird sunned itself in solitary splendour. For a long while we were puzzled by a pinky-brown bird with a black not-quite-crest, rather like a plump bulbul. It fiddled unconcernedly with berries on a dry branch while we craned necks and binoculars and tried to out-guess each other. Afterwards the book told us that this was the black-headed sibia, and by the end of our trip it had become an old friend. I think it was this bird about which Dr. Salim Ali was famously mistaken on one of his expeditions. From feeding on flowers which contained white pollen, some of these birds had acquired a white 'ashmark' on their foreheads, which led S.A. to assume for a while that he had discovered a new sub-species. [The bird about which Salim Ali "was famously mistaken" in Bhutan was the longtailed sibia (*Heterophasia picaoides*). Editor].

In the afternoon we drove down to Kaladungi, and happened to spot Jim Corbett's home when we stopped at a tea-shop opposite. The winding downhill road, which offers panoramic views of the plains, also offered views of blossom-headed parakeets flying across the meadow, swirling and swooping together like a single organism. There was some thick scrub by the side of the road, and in one of these I saw what seemed to be a white-eye but with a supercilium instead of a circle around the eye. This must have been one of the crowned willow warblers, of which there are a bewildering number, and one would have to choose a single name at one's own peril.

On the afternoon of June 4 we reached the idyllic home of Lakshmi and Kanhai Lall in Sitla, near Mukteshwar. This is a house and garden which recalls a Swiss resort, surrounded by forest, orchards, and a private view of the snow peaks. We entered this picture postcard and lived inside it for two days. It was also a paradise for birds. We had breakfast and tea beneath laden apricot and mulberry trees while white-eyes and flowerpeckers made merry above. Occasionally a Himalayan tree-pie alighted ponderously on a neighbouring branch. A distant tree was alive with green pigeons, but *which* green pigeon? Sitla offers you several. This one had red legs, and we learnt from Fleming's *Birds of Nepal and the Western Himalayas* that this made it a wedge-tailed green pigeon. From

our window we followed the nesting activities of a whitecheeked bulbul in a Banksia rose-bush just outside. And as the evening came on and we sat in the paved front garden, riches fell at our feet in the form of tits. First came the glistening little green-backed tit, so much like a picture in a children's book, and close on its heels the yellow tit, more properly tit-like with its little crest. Then a striated laughing thrush flapped its way to the same spot. At other times, from the same spot, we heard the call of the black-throated jay, or glimpsed, as it might be, an ashy-bellied drongo or a rufous turtle dove. There were some tall eucalyptus in the distance, and on one of them I saw what I stoutly maintained was a Himalayan whistling thrush, till a last ray of sunlight showed an unexpected splash of silver-grey on its wings. It was then revealed as a grey-winged blackbird. The same eucalyptus was later discovered to harbour a gang of slaty-headed parakeets. Or were they female blossom-headed parakeets, which look very similar apparently? But then why would so many female blossom headed parakeets congregate together in the absence of a single male blossom-headed parakeet? It is very much pleasanter to assume that they were slaty-headed parakeets and allow the assumption to enlarge one's list. On one walk from Sitla to Mukteshwar (again, a beautiful walk through rhododendron forest) we saw a streaked laughing thrush, which is distinguished from the striated by a thick brown crest. Then we heard, quite unmistakably, the ill-mannered chuckle of a third laughing thrush, the white-throated, and were able to track the noise to a flapping bundle behind a bush.

Early the next morning, walking along the same track, I saw two most imposing avians. The first was an enormous woodpecker, which had a red cap, greeny-gold back, and black scales on the front, busy butchering a dry branch,. On taking refuge in Fleming, this was discovered to be the large scaly-bellied woodpecker. The second was the great Himalayan barbet, enormous and iridescent. This has a huge yellow bill, blue head, and bronze-green body.

In the evening we were taken to see a small building not far away where clustering nests of common swallows hugged the ceiling. The meadow outside resounded with the call of the black partridge, which has been rendered as 'Sheer-daram-*shak*karak!' a Persian phrase which means 'I have milk with sugar!' This seems an unlikely fluid for a Persian poet to be rejoicing over, but our host reminded us that the same call can be given the more zestful rendering of 'Pan-beedi-*ciga*rette!' shouted out in the same impetuous way.

Finally, our last image of Sitla. On a middle-sized 'Thun' tree in a corner of the same meadow, we saw the handiwork of a woodpecker which has apparently adopted the tree over a period of time. Every inch of the bark was covered with marks made by the woodpecker's beak, and in so regular a pattern that the whole looked like an abstract painting. It was a strangely moving sight.

Driving to Ranikhet the next morning, the most pleasing bird on offer was a crested bunting on a bush by the road. This reminded me once more of Dr. Salim Ali. I remember an occasion when we were driving from Bombay to Alibag on the Maharashtra coast, and he was enormously excited to see a pair of these birds, again on a bush by the side of the road, somewhere near Panvel. This must have been in the sixties; it is extremely unlikely that any such thing would be visible on the same road today.

The highlight of Ranikhet was a long evening walk towards Bhalu Dam. It is a beautiful route through thick forest. Towards sunset, as the shadows lengthened, our local guide enlivened matters greatly by assuring us that attacks by bears were very common at precisely that time of the day. At one point there was a sudden commotion in the undergrowth, and I am not saying that we covered ourselves with glory. But mercifully it was only a black-throated jay - a hefty pinky-brown bird with a long, striated grey and black tail, yellow bill, black head and crest. It dived to the forest floor in front of us and pirouetted about for a good long time.

The drive to Kausani produced more crested buntings, as well as pied bush chats, hoopoes, and a white-breasted kingfisher. The actual arrival was a disappointment on which I would not wish to dwell, since Kausani, like so much else on this planet, is not what it used to be. Nonetheless we had reasonably pleasant rooms with a view of the snow ranges, and grey tits as well as green-backed tits pecking away outside our door.

The next morning our mission was to rediscover the forest rest house where we stayed as children. We found this eerily unchanged, down to the sundial on the front lawn. In the thinning pine forests around it we saw a number of Himalayan tree creepers, creeping as required. And Kausani redeemed itself somewhat when two pairs of pine martens bounded across our path. But the event immediately succeeding this was an unnerving one. Out of the blue we found that enormous logs were rolling downhill in our direction, and that the logs were deaf to all threats and shouts. We scurried away without loss of time, and on the way home we were soothed by the sight of a new tit. It was a long slender tit with a long tail, snowy white underparts, black cap and head, and a grey back with a white streak on the wings. We found that it answers to the name of white-naped tit.

The next day was to be dedicated to adventure. We had heard that the trek to Peenath, i.e., to the Pinakeshwar temple some distance away, was uniquely beautiful, and had collected a guide and sandwiches for the event. The trek is also a good twelve kilometres of nearly vertical climb, but our guide appears to have taken a good look at the two memsaabs who had hired him, to have sized them up unerringly, and to have left this fact for them to find out. We left early in the morning and reached the base of the mountain around eight. It was here that we had our first view of the red-billed blue magpie, that strikingly colourful denizen of the mountains. Three of these birds flew across the fields in front of us to confabulate together on the pines. Then there was the pleasant sight of a cinammon tree sparrow, which I remember seeing on every branch during a visit to Kashmir in the seventies.

Then we were panting our way up a rocky and narrow path with gnarled and stunted trees on either side, thick forest on the slopes, and glorious green views falling away endlessly beneath. And, there was the tiny white temple for which we were headed, seeming to move further away at every pant. We saw some thick-billed flowerpeckers here, and a golden oriole delighted us all by swooping into a tree just ahead. And we kept hearing, as indeed we did throughout the trip, the well-known call '*cross*word *puzz*le!' belonging to the Indian cuckoo.

After this we had a leisurely view of another splendid woodpecker. It had a bright golden head, bronze-green back, and red under the tail when it flew. Fleming pronounces this to be the lesser yellownape. Of course there was little else about the situation that was leisurely, with the temple continuing to distance itself, the sun getting hotter, and every muscle screaming in protest. However, the temple was finally achieved, the final view was exclaimed over, and we began our descent towards an extremely long, extremely cold, drink. When we were half-way down, it began to seem that the famous 'afternoon rain' of the mountains was about to be visited upon us. Or, more precisely, that the sky was preparing itself to fall upon our heads. We were then walking down a cliff path which was wide enough for one single shoe to be placed in gingerly fashion after another single shoe. Furthermore, the path was thickly covered with pine needles, which are about as slippery as glass. Looking down into the depths below was not recommended. In these circumstances, the effect of a thundering downpour, one which promised to wash away the path itself, would have been interesting to contemplate. Nonetheless, we concentrated fiercely on the prospect of the cold drink, and when the downpour finally came we were watching awestruck from inside the Tata Sumo.

The day after that we drove to Binsar, which adjoins the Corbett National Park on one side and the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary on the other. It is also one of the most beautiful places I have seen. Weighty with forest, it swirls in and out of mist, swoops into deep ravines, disappears into cloudy mountains, and opens up to flaming sunsets. Early in the afternoon Zai and I were walking to the 'Snow Viewing Point' immediately after another of those mountain storms which threaten to end the world without further ado. We reached a small clearing where the sun was shining glassily on emerald leaves, and as we arrived it burst into life. Hundreds of small birds began to fly crazily about, apparently in demented search of the berry-like fruit of a particular tree. These turned out to be chestnut-bellied nuthatches, which I had assumed were never seen in large numbers. Interestingly enough we saw another flock of these nuthatches, behaving in much the same way, early the next morning in another spot. This, too, was after a shower. It seems to me that this would make a perfect subject of study for some eager young ornithologist.

A long walk later in the day provided the sight of a shaheen falcon, deliciously golden-brown and aristocratic, sitting quietly on a branch and allowing us a good long view. This was of special interest to my daughter, who is called Shaheen but who had never yet been able to see her namesake. Walking along the tarred road down to Binsar Sanctuary, we saw what seemed to be a blackbird of sorts but with a most conspicuously defined white band below the neck. This may have been the whitecollared blackbird. We were more certain of the grey-winged blackbird which we saw once more later on, and, still staying with the greys, the grey-headed flycatcher. This is a small flycatcher, yellow all over with a grey head and crest. Another thrilling little flycatcher which I had never seen before was the slaty blue, dark blue above and white below, with a thick white eyebrow.

Our final stop was in Naukuchiyatal ('the nine-cornered lake') which is a little below Naini Tal and has been developed as a tourist spot around this mountain lake. In terms of birding the best part of this was an evening boat-ride, because the boatman rapidly discovered that birds spotted for the Memsaab would translate into increased revenue at the end, and so we saw pied as well as whitebreasted kingfishers swooping into the lake, and a pair of paradise flycatchers flying gloriously into the woods. One dry tree at the edge of the lake was covered with little green bitterns. Again near the edge, where tall bushes grew out of marshy sludge, we saw a whitebreasted waterhen picking its way delicately to the water. By now the boatman had got into the act sufficiently to promise us that chicks would follow. And he turned his boat and thumped his oar and splashed relentlessly till chicks did indeed appear, three of them following the mother hen in a little docile line.

And that was a good image to end with, because that was the last evening. Our time was up, and we had to think of getting our own offspring, so very docile as they are, back to Delhi.

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Cover : (Female) **Purplerumped Sunbird** *Nectarinia zeylonica.* Particularly fond of the nectar of drumstick tree. The bird inserts its beak into the flower and in a second the flower is robbed of its store of nectar through a tiny hole in the bird's long tubular tongue.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

Flying to the rescue of the forest

MARK COCKER

In the open-air markets of West Africa it is usual to find among the lines of brilliantly coloured fruit and vegetable stands a number of vendors surrounded by exotic bundles of leaves or dried herbs, heaps of roots, peeled bark, lumps of stone and mineral fragments. These are all key elements in the continent's ancient and traditional collection of drugs.

But other routine ingredients on the African medicine stall are bird feathers. Two types are widely found; a short pale pink feather and a long quill irregularly patterned with dark crimson. The first comes from the tail of the grey parrot, the second from an African forest bird called a turaco. Both are cherished regions of Nigeria whole villages are consumed by disputes between those wanting to catch grey parrots for the lucrative pet-bird trade, and those who prize and sustainably harvest the wild birds' tail feathers for medicine.

Just across the border, in Cameroon's mountainous north-western region, a species of turaco has become an even greater cause *célébre*. The bird in question is called Bannerman's turaco after the Scottish ornithologist who first described it earlier this century. But to the local Oku people it is known more simply as "fen", and seeing the creature, finding its nest, or even just hearing its hoarse whooping call are all a source of good luck and health. Its flight feathers are treasured as a potent medicinal ingredient by traditional doctors and also play a key role in Oku society, with only the most esteemed members of the community being allowed to wear them.

It is deeply fitting that this totem bird is as physically beautiful as it is culturally important. Pigeon-sized, it has a bright olive green body that darkens on the tail to a deep royal blue. The top of the head sports a dramatic scarlet crest. But it is when the bird flies that it looks most impressive; the wing feathers are deep crimson, and during the short time that it takes to the air it sets the forest canopy momentarily ablaze.

Ironically, while fen were always viewed with reverence as "the kings of the forest", the forests themselves enjoyed no such consideration. In western Cameroon they have been steadily felled to get at the rich volcanic soils, whose agricultural fertility supports some of the highest population densities found in the country. By the 1980s Bannerman's turaco was largely confined to the 200,000 hectares of the Kilum-Ijim forest, an area dominated by the jagged peaks of

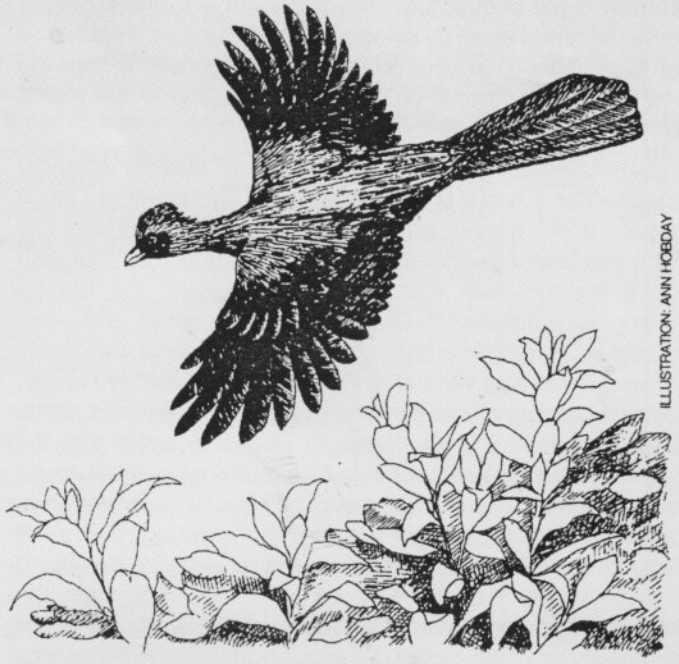

ILLUSTRATION: ANN HOBDAY

Mount Oku. And even Oku's slopes were being steadily denuded - a habitat loss that threatened its turaco with extinction.

Fortunately, in the past decade a conservation project organised by BirdLife International has been able to harness the bird's cultural status and use it as a vehicle to raise awareness of the forest's wider importance. For Kilum-Ijim is of enormous biological significance, being the biggest and highest montane forest in West Africa, with the last major stands of bamboo and podocarpus found in the region.

As well as a suite of endemic plants and animals, the forest supports Oku's entire watershed. In the rainy season it prevents soil erosion on the steep slopes, while in the dry season it supplies perennial streams that are essential for crop irrigation. The forest is a source of (theoretically) renewable harvests of firewood, building materials, food and medicines. It is, in short, an entire support system for the 300,000 surrounding inhabitants. And just as much as their famous crimson-winged emblem-bird, the fortunes of the Oku people themselves are tied to the future of the Kilum-Ijim forest.

Courtesy : Guardian Weekly, April 4, 1999.