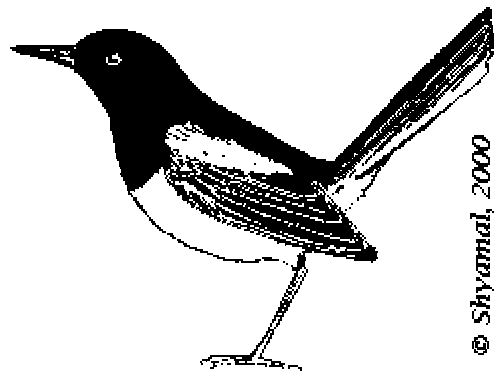


A Guide to Watching Birds

With special reference to birdwatching in the Bangalore area



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Why watch birds?

People watch birds for a number of reasons and mere curiosity is often the first. People continue to watch birds for the challenge that they provide to the senses and the intellect- spotting, identifying and trying to understand their behaviour. Watching birds can make a morning walk more interesting, provide a reason for getting outdoors or even to socialize.

There are less than 10,000 species of birds in the world and nearly 1200 of them are found in India. They are diverse enough to be interesting, easy to identify and observe and yet not overwhelming in numbers like perhaps the insects which are equally interesting to observe. About 500 bird species may be found in southern India and nearly 300 of them have been recorded in the Bangalore region.

Apart from being an enjoyable pastime, the study of birds has also led to advances in more serious fields such as behaviour, biology, ecology, aeronautics and medicine. Unlike in most other sciences, careful observation and note-making could make almost anyone contribute to the science of ornithology. Many major ornithological studies have in fact been the work of amateurs.

Where to watch birds?

There is a common myth that one has to go into thick forests and bird sanctuaries to see birds. The fact is that birds are distributed in all kinds of habitats. There are of course certain kinds of birds that can be found only in forests or other specific habitats, but cities and the places around often provide very good places for watching birds.

A beginner should start looking around in places close to their own homes as this allows one to watch at leisure and doesn't need much planning. Watching the common species helps build the basic skills of observation that would be needed later and it is a good idea to be ready for birds at all times.

Yet another myth is that one has to trek and walk long distances in order to see birds. It is almost always better to spend time in a small area looking around quietly and carefully. Time spent looking out from a good window or balcony can be more fruitful than a long trek through a forest.

The presence of birds in a location depends on the kind of food and shelter available there and even when birds are present, getting to spot them requires a skill that needs to be developed. Active and vocal birds are detected more easily while silent and inactive birds can be quite difficult to spot.

Parks, well-wooded campuses, water-bodies, fields and open lands are good areas for birdwatching. Bangalore has several good bird habitats. The Lalbagh botanical garden, the University of Agricultural Sciences, Indian Institute of Science and Bangalore University campuses have good park like habitats while the Hebbal, Lalbagh and Hoskote lakes are very good wetland habitats. Most areas in Bangalore lack undergrowth and scrub. In order to see species that are specific to such habitats one has to move to the outskirts for instance near the Bannerghatta State Forest. Large water bodies such as Hoskote, Hessarghatta and Thippagondanahalli are also present on the outskirts. Good undergrowth and canopy covered habitats can be found in the Nandi Hills and some parts of Bannerghatta.

When to watch birds?

Bird activity varies with time of day and year. Most garden birds become active early at dawn and remain active in the early half of the forenoon. This is the time when they are easiest to detect, especially by their calls. There is also a second period of high activity later in the afternoon at around 3 and this is a good time for visiting small waterbodies, since many garden birds visit water at this time. Many of the larger birds of prey, storks and the vultures become active only when hot thermals are available for them to soar without much effort and it is good to be at an elevated vantage point at around 10 AM to see many of these species. Some groups such as the nightjars, owls and night herons are active only in the darkness before dawn and after dusk.

The time of year is even more important. In the winter months (October to March) one can find many of the migrant species from the Himalayas and beyond while the summer months provide opportunities to observe the breeding activities of the resident birds. The rainy season is usually unsuitable for bird observation, but spells of clear weather may provide interesting insights into the activities of the birds.

What bird is that?

Names

When someone asks - "what is that bird?" the expected answer is a **name**. Identifying a bird is essentially the act of consistently being able to assign the same name to the same species of bird. Bird identification is often misunderstood as the aim of birdwatching. There is far more to knowing a bird than its name. It is however a good idea to know the **correct** names for the purpose of communicating with others. Although most birdwatchers in India use English names for the birds, many of the birds have very interesting and descriptive local names. The existence of local names is an indication of familiarity of the people with the bird and while implying their ability to **identify** it also provide interesting information on the behaviour of the bird. An example is the Malayalam name for the Indian Pitta which translates to 'Six-O-Clock-bird', a reference to its habit of calling at dawn and dusk. Many birdnames are based on the calls of the bird. An example is the 'Kutroo-pakshi' (= 'Kutroo'-bird) for the Small green Barbet in the *Kodava* language. The Hoopoe is an English example of a bird named after its call.

Similarities and differences in birds lead to longer names. Our innate ability to classify birds leads to the use of common group names and the use of additional qualifiers. Thus the **Jungle Crow** and **House Crow** are similar in being crows but different in their perceived habitat preferences. This is not a rule and distinctive species such as the **Raven** have an unqualified name in spite of being a kind of crow. The science of grouping birds, as indeed of other organisms, is called taxonomy. Taxonomists give every kind of bird a unique 'scientific name'. The scientific name consists of two parts - a **genus** followed by a **species**. The scientific names are given in italics by convention with the first letter of the genus in capitals. Most crows belong to the genus *Corvus* which is just the Latin name for crow. The scientific name of the Jungle Crow is *Corvus macrorhynchus*. *Macrorhynchus* is Latin for 'large bill'. As you would have noticed, the 'scientific names' are not very different from the common names in their structure. Knowledge of Latin roots is useful in understanding the origin of these names; it is easy for instance to see that *Muscicapa* is derived from *Musca* (housefly) and *capio* (to seize) and is the generic name for many flycatchers. The scientific classification of birds is based on criteria that can change, causing rearrangements as well as changes in their scientific names. Scientific classification can be sometimes be quite contrary to classification based on our visual perception.

Most birdwatchers in India use the bird names popularized in the books by the late Dr. Salim Ali. The names used in Indian bird identification books sometime differ from the names for the same species in other countries. With increasing global tourism there is a trend towards standardizing common names for the ease of use for touring birdwatchers.

The following pages introduce you to the bird families and their group characteristics. Understanding the grouping helps in consulting bird identification guides by narrowing down the possibilities and the number of pages to search. The descriptions given here cover most of the resident bird species of Bangalore; birds that one might see at any time of the year.

Identifying a bird is not very different from identifying a friend in a crowd. The principal identification marks of birds are

Location, Size, Colouration, Shape and Structure, Behavior and Call

Location

Where was the bird seen? What was the kind of habitat? Where was it perched ?

Many bird species show strong preferences for habitat. Habitats can help both rule out and suggest species identities. It is also possible to ask someone who has been to the same area or even to guide someone to the same place to aid in identification. Identification of the birds of an area is made easier by the availability of local checklists. A checklist is a compilation of species of an area made by one or more persons and often includes information on season of occurrence and indications of the commonness. It is unlikely that you will see a rare bird in your first visit to an area and it is a good idea to rule out all similar looking species in a local checklist before trying to confirm your identification.

Within a broad habitat there can be more specific preferences such as the kind of perch site or the depth of water in a wetland. There are species that are always seen on the ground while others may prefer to perch on electric wires. There are species that may be found at the edge of water but never in deep water.

Size

What was the size of the bird? It is useful to build a relative scale of birds using common birds as yardsticks. This is a skill that should be developed in the initial stages of birding. The birds of India vary in size from the 10 centimeter long Flowerpeckers to the 7 foot tall Sarus Cranes. The birds of Bangalore range in size from the Flowerpeckers to the Grey Herons and Storks.

Behaviour

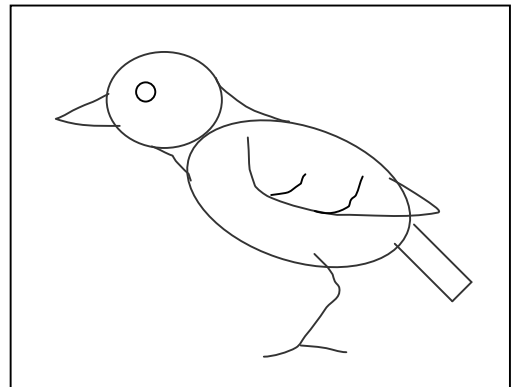
How does the bird move around? Is it very active? Does it call as it moves?

Bird behaviour can be so characteristic that one can sometimes tell a species without any other information. Certain bird families have characteristic traits. For instance most flycatchers sit still on a perch, fly out now and then to snap at an insect and fly back to their perch while leaf-warblers actively forage along branches as they flick their wings. It is also useful to try and describe the gaits of every bird you see (Does the bird run, hop, walk or stalk stealthily). Try also to describe the flight pattern (Does the bird fly with rapid wing strokes, does it fly in a straight line or does it have a dipping flight, does it hover, glide or dive?)

Colouration

Colour is perhaps what makes birds so attractive. Colours can however be misleading in bad lighting conditions and some individual birds can have abnormal plumage with lack of colour, excess black pigmentation or unexpected colours.

It is a good idea to make a rough sketch of a new bird seen and to make notes on the various parts and their colours. At a later stage you may also note details such as the length of the beak in relation to the head, the length of the leg, the position of the body and tail. A sketch can be constructed using ovals for the head and body and then adding details.



Call

Birds communicate with each other largely using calls. Calls are often specific to species although some species have a wider repertoire and still others have the ability to imitate. Calls are described in books using descriptions, analogies to familiar sources of sounds or phrases and syllables, for instance the Red-wattled Lapwing's alarm call is transcribed as 'Did-You-Do-It'. Identifying species from their calls is a skill that comes with experience.

It is a good idea to watch birds calling and try to associate it with the situations. Calls made when feeding can be very different from calls given out when they take flight or when they fight.

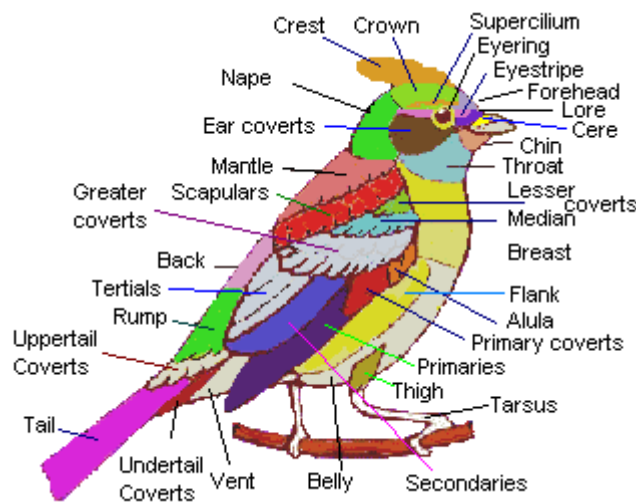
Many birdcalls have not been fully described and it is quite possible that you might come across new calls that don't match the descriptions given in books.

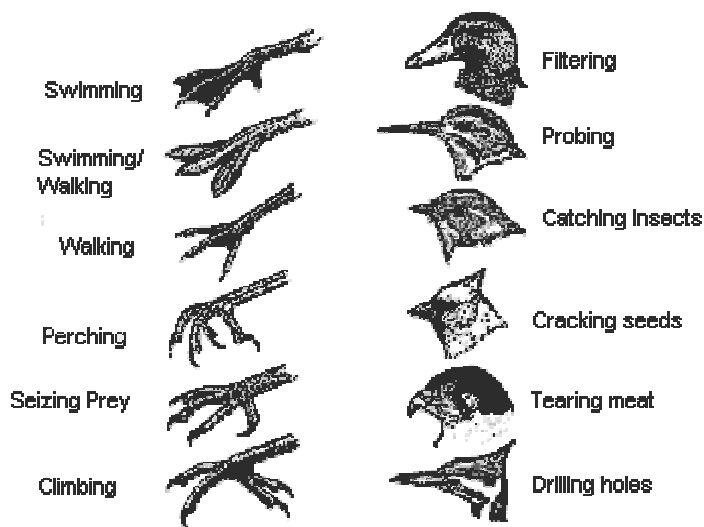
Shape and Structure

The shape of a bird, its bill, the proportions of its head, neck, body, tail and legs can also be characteristic enough to identify a species from just a silhouette.

It is important to know the parts of the birds. An illustrated key to the various terms for parts of a bird is given here. The bird illustrated is fictitious and the colours are assigned merely to demarcate the regions indicated.

A number of finer characters of the feet and beak may be identified. The shape of the tail can also be distinctive. The overall ratios of the head, body, and tail are also very characteristic of groups.





Specific groups and their descriptions

This section describes various groups, which correspond in most cases to families in the taxonomic classification. The groups have been rearranged according to the habitats. The margin silhouettes are not to scale and should merely be used as hints.

Groups Found Predominantly near water

Birds that are found in water have many adaptations. Birds that hunt in shallow water by fishing tend to have long legs and long bills and neck. Birds that swim and dive tend to have webbing between the toes to help in swimming. Some groups have waterproof feathers.

Grebes

These birds may be seen in some of the waterbodies and looks like a small duck-like bird that dives underwater and reappears some distance away. The only member of this group we get to see is the Little Grebe or Dabchick. They are rarely seen flying or on land.



Ducks

Ducks are usually seen on some of the larger water bodies. The commonest resident duck is the Spot-billed duck which can be identified at a distance by a white patch on its side. A number of migrant species may be seen in winter. They are surprisingly colourful when seen from close or through good binoculars. A somewhat duck like bird that is seen commonly in water bodies is the Coot, this is a black bird with a white bill and face. The Coot however is not a true duck. See the section on Rails, Coots and Moorhens.



Cormorants

Cormorants are long necked crow-like birds that occur in medium to large water bodies. Their distinctive feature is the fact that they have feathers that are not waterproof. The result of this being that they have to dry their outstretched wings in the sun before flying. They hunt fish by diving under the surface of the water. They are mostly all black in colour.



Pelicans

These are very rarely seen in the Bangalore area but are quite distinctive by their size as well as shape.



Egrets Herons and Bitterns

Egrets are white, long-legged, long-billed and long-necked water birds that hunt fish by stalking them in the shallow edges of lakes. Most Herons are coloured and never completely white. The Grey and Purple herons are tall and long necked. Cattle Egrets are slightly different in that they may be found in dry areas, usually following grazing cattle and picking insects that are disturbed.



The Pond heron and the Night heron are smaller birds that forage on the edges of waterbodies. The Pond heron is a very common bird and can be missed when it is sitting still but is prominent when it takes to flight with a flash of white wings.

Bitterns are very elusive and cryptically coloured heron-like birds that hide in grass and are rarely seen.



Storks

Storks are large, heavy wading birds with a stout bill. They are quite uncommon in Bangalore waters but one occasionally gets to see White-necked storks and Painted storks in large water bodies or well watered fields. One may occasionally get to see a flock flying overhead. Storks find food by actively wading with their bills immersed in water, probing with partly opened beaks.



Ibises and Spoonbills

Ibises are large birds with a characteristic down curved bill. Ibises can be seen on dry fields as well as near large water bodies. Spoonbills are large, white and have a distinct spoon shaped bill. They are also found near large water bodies.



Rails, Coot, Moorhens

Rails are found in vegetation on the edges of water bodies. They walk most of the time and their flight is weak. The white-breasted waterhen is the commonest member.



The Coot is a black duck-like bird with a white bill and face. It is usually seen in deep water. Moorhens are larger birds that walk on aquatic vegetation at the edges of lakes. The Purple Moorhen is seen on hyacinth covered lakes while the Indian moorhen is rarer and is seen in less disturbed waterbodies.



Groups Found Predominantly in the air

Birds that spend much of the time in the air usually have large and long wings and short legs.

Birds of Prey and Vultures

This group includes hawks, eagles, kites, vultures and falcons. The owls are considered separately although they have similar adaptations. Most of these birds are large, diurnal, have long claws on muscular toes and hooked beaks. They predominantly feed on meat obtained either by scavenging or by hunting.

The commonest of these is the Pariah Kite. This bird has adapted itself to urban environments and feeds on all kinds of refuse. A related species is the Brahminy kite which has a white head. This however has a preference for areas close to water. The Pariah kite has a tail that has a shallow fork.



The smaller birds of prey include the Shikra, which is a small hawk that typically hunts palm-squirrels and small birds. Hawks have rounded wings and longish tails that help them maneuver through foliage and trees.



Falcons are fast fliers with pointed wings and long tails. The commonest falcon is the Kestrel, a winter visitor, which has the ability to hover in one place as it looks for prey. The Black-winged Kite is a larger black and white bird that also hovers, and like the kestrel, is seen in open areas.

Swifts

Swifts are mostly seen in the air. They feed on insects and flocks are often seen high over the city. The most common is the House Swift, which is black with a white rump. They make nests in the corners of old buildings and structures using clay. These birds are rarely seen perching except when at the nest.



Swallows

Swallows are very similar to swifts in size but are fork-tailed and capable of perching on wires. They also hunt low in the air often just above water or ground level. The commonest swallow species are the Red-rumped Swallow, which is a resident and the Common Swallow which is a common winter visitor.



Groups associated with park, field, forest and garden lands

These birds are the most diverse and they account for most of our birds.

Owls and owlets

Owls are very distinctive in their shape and forward facing eyes that make them resemble some of the primates and is perhaps responsible for the notion of the 'wise owl'. They have excellent night vision and their binocular vision helps them detect prey accurately in low light. They also use their acute hearing to find their prey. The smaller owlets that one can see near streetlights are the Spotted Owlets. Their screeching is often heard in the early morning and late evening.



Larger owls like the Great Horned Owl are rare. Some owls such as the Scop's Owl and Mottled Wood-Owl are more often heard than seen.

Some larger owls have feathers that give them a horned appearance. Owls nest in old hollows of trees, sometimes using the eaves of old homes.

Partridges, quails and gamebirds

These are large birds that live on the ground. They have stout legs that they use to scratch the ground to obtain food in soil and litter. The commonly seen members of this family in the Bangalore region are the Grey Partridge, Jungle Bush Quail, Grey Junglefowl and Peafowl. Spurfowl are occasionally seen in some of the forested areas nearby.



Pigeons and Doves

Pigeons are large short-tailed birds, the most familiar being the Blue-rock pigeon that is a feral species. These birds are originally inhabitants of cliffs. Fruit Pigeons are tree-dwelling, usually green and feed on fruiting trees such as figs. Green Pigeons are very uncommon in the Bangalore region.



The doves are smaller long-tailed members of the same family. They are reasonably common in residential areas as well as in open areas around the city. The Spotted, Little Brown and Collared Doves are the main representatives of this group.

Plovers, Lapwings

These are ground birds that are three-toed, long-legged, long-winged and short tailed. They are found in areas with water or stony and bare open ground. The Little Ringed Plover, Yellow-wattled and Red-wattled Lapwings are the most common members of this group.



Cuckoos

Cuckoos are famous for their parasitic habits. The commonest cuckoo in Bangalore is the Koel which is parasitic on Crows while the Crow-pheasant(or Coucal) which is not parasitic may be seen in well-wooded areas. The Hawk-cuckoo and the Indian Cuckoo are occasionally seen or heard. The Plaintive cuckoo and the Pied Crested Cuckoo are also sometimes seen.



Parakeets

Parakeets are slim, long-tailed members of the parrot family. The commonly found members in the Bangalore area are the Rose-ringed Parakeets. One occasionally gets to see or hear the Blossom-headed Parakeets.



Nightjars

Nightjars are open-land birds that are active at dusk and dawn. They are insect eaters and are rarely seen in the day. They are more easily identified by their calls than by their plumage since they are more often to be met with in poor light. They are sometimes seen sitting on roads. They are very cryptically coloured and hard to identify. The Common Nightjar is easily identified by its call which is likened to a stone skipping on a frozen lake; a series of chipping notes that become shorter and more frequent, ending with a 'churr'.

Rollers, Kingfishers, Hoopoe

The Indian Roller is often seen on roadside electric wires in open areas. This blue winged bird is named for its aerobatic courtship displays. The Kingfishers are distinctive in having a large pointed bill. Three Kingfishers are common in the Bangalore area; The White-breasted Kingfisher is often found away from water, The Pied Kingfisher has a habit of hovering over water when fishing. The Small Blue Kingfisher is a small Kingfisher and is one of the world's most widespread bird species.



The Hoopoe is an orange-brown bird with black-and-white-striped wings and a distinctive fans-shaped crest. The hoopoe forages on the ground for insects using its slender down curved bill. This bird is widely distributed around the world.

Bee-eaters

Bee-eaters are small, greenish birds that are often perched on wires. They sally out to capture insects which they take back to their perch. They typically beat the caught insects against the perch before swallowing. Many species have their central tail-feathers extending beyond the tail like wires. The commonest species is the Small Green Bee-eater.



Sunbirds

These are very small birds with curved beaks. They feed on nectar obtained from flowers. The males are dark and glossy with iridescent colours that are visible at close range and in



good light. The females are usually white or yellowish below and olive above. The two commonly occurring species are the Purple Sunbird and the Purple-rumped Sunbird. A third species that is perhaps becoming commoner is the Maroon-breasted Sunbird, which has a longer bill than the previous two species.

Flowerpeckers

These are also very small, resemble female sunbirds but have a short and straight beak. They feed on berries and the Singapore Cherry tree is a favorite. The commonest species is the Tickell’s Flowerpecker.



Flycatchers

Flycatchers are small birds with slender and straight bills. They are quite characteristic in their habit of sitting still and looking out for insects. When hunting insects they fly out, capture the insect and typically fly back to a perch. Most of the Flycatchers in our area are winter visitors. The commonest resident is the Tickell’s Blue Flycatcher. Flycatchers are typically seen below the canopy of trees.



Drongos

These birds are frequently seen on electric wires. They are largely insectivorous. They are sometimes seen following cattle to feed on insects that are disturbed by the grazing.

The Grey Drongo is a fairly common winter visitor while the Black Drongo is the commonest resident species. The White-bellied Drongo and the Hair-crested Drongo are two other species that are occasionally seen.



Barbets

These are stout-billed fruit eating birds. With the ability to chisel out a hole in a tree, they are the most prominent hole-nesting birds in Bangalore. The two species commonly seen are the Small Green Barbet and the Crimson-breasted barbet or the coppersmith; the latter being smaller and more colourful. The calls of both the species is characteristic. The call of the Small Green Barbet is the familiar “Kotroo-kotroo” and the Coppersmith being a regularly repeated “Tonk” call.



Warblers, wren-warblers, Tailor-bird

These are small dull-coloured birds that are usually difficult to see. The wren-warblers and the tailorbird have a long upright tail and are resident species. The Ashy wren-warbler is seen in urban gardens while the Plain wren-warbler is seen in fields of broad-leaved grasses. A

number of other warblers including the leaf-warblers are winter visitors to our area. The Greenish Leaf-warbler and Blyth’s reed-warbler are the most common among these.



Chats, Robins, Thrushes

These are medium-sized birds and many are good singers. The Chats are small birds that sit upright on perches in open areas. The Pied Bushchat is a common member of this group and is found in open areas. The Indian Robin is a blackish ground bird that is again found in open areas often alongside the Bushchat. The Magpie Robin is a black and white bird that is found in gardens and is well-known for its song. Other members of this group such as the thrushes are mostly winter visitors to the Bangalore area. Nandi hills is a very good area to see these wintering thrushes. The Indian Pitta is a very colourful thrush like bird that is also seen in gardens in winter.



Bulbuls, Iora, Minivets

Bulbuls are slim, medium-sized arboreal birds, some having a pointed crest. The common members are the Red-vented Bulbul and the Red-whiskered Bulbul. The Iora is a very brilliant yellow, white and black bird that is found in scrub areas. The Small Minivet is a slim bird with red or yellow on the wings and is seen in scrub and light forest.



Shrikes

These are open-land birds with short hooked bills and often have a dark stripe across the eye. The Rufous-backed and Bay-backed shrikes are residents in the Bangalore region but are becoming rarer. The Brown Shrike is the commonest winter visitor.



Tits

These are small sparrow-like birds that feed on insects. They are strongly patterned in black, grey and white. They often hang on the ends of branches as they forage. The Grey Tit is the only member of this family in Bangalore although the rare and endangered White-winged Tit has also been recorded.



Babblers

Babblers are dull coloured birds with rounded wings and long tails. They usually move in small groups. The commonest is the White-headed Babbler.



Crows, Treepies

Crows are very intelligent and common birds that have made good use of humans and cities. They are mostly black. The all black Jungle Crow and the grey-necked House Crow are the commonest representatives.



The Treepies are relatives of the Crows and are found in scrub forest. They are long-tailed and short-billed and have a wide variety of calls.

Mynas, Starlings

The Common Myna is recognized by the yellow patch behind the eye. The Jungle Myna lacks the yellow patch and has a tuft of feathers at the base of the upper beak. The smaller members of this group are the Black-headed or Brahminy Myna. The Grey-headed Mynas and Rosy Starlings are winter visitors to this area.



White-eyes

These are small greenish-yellow birds with a white ring around the eye. They are seen in gardens and feed on nectar and insects. They are found in small groups which stay together with low 'cheer' contact calls that they make as they forage.



Wagtails, Pipits

Wagtails are waterside birds that feed on insects. They characteristically wag their tails up and down as they walk. The Large Pied Wagtail is the commonest resident member of this group and is often seen atop rooftops and water tanks. Several other wagtails species are winter visitors.



The Pipits are sparrow-like, short-tailed members of this group. They are mostly brown coloured and are seen on bare ground or cultivation. They run over ground as they forage and take to flight only when threatened with a distinctive 'peep-pit' call.

Larks

These are very much like the pipits in appearance and habitat but often have a short crest. They do not however run about like the pipits. They also look bulkier and will crouch when approached and take off when an observer nears it. Skylarks are seen near waterbodies and can be seen fluttering high in the air as they sing. The Bushlarks are bulkier in appearance and are seen in scrub and open land. Their song flight involves flying up into the air and fluttering down with a trilling call.



Sparrows, Munias and Finches

These are small, short-billed, grain and seed-eating birds. The House Sparrow is a typical member of this family. They often forage in flocks. The Munias are colourful little birds that are often seen in fields or perched on wires beside fields.



How can I contribute?

Keep notes on the birds that you see around you. This helps you and may also turn out to be useful at a later stage. Keep complete notes on a day's outing and do not skip note on what you may consider as common species. Keep notes on the numbers of the birds that you saw as well as the weather, the trees or plant on which you may have seen the bird and the trees or plants that were in bloom. All these can form the basis of a future analysis that may turn up very interesting and useful information.

Go beyond the field guides. Treat information in books with caution, try to check the information given in them. Ask yourself questions. What is the bird doing? Does it have any special adaptations in structure or behaviour? What does it feed on? Why is it calling? Does it have any characteristic behavioural traits?

Exchange your notes with others and publish your observations in birdwatching magazines such as the **Newsletter for Birdwatchers** or join email discussion groups such as **bngbirds** (send an email to bngbirds-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).