

Random notes from Bangalore

by Zafar Futehally

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On Christmas day I wandered for a couple of hours around Palace Orchards in Bangalore to see the birdlife of the area. Ever since we came here in the 5th November I have been wanting to have a good look at the Large Green Barbets whose calls are heard from everywhere in the city, but whose protective coloration make them invisible. This morning I achieved my aim. A pair on a glomerata fig tree eating berries, and from time to time beaked each other affectionately. They did not call at all during the half hour or so that I watched them. On the same tree was a Purple Sunbird in eclipse plumage with the long dark line running down the throat. A long 'kissing' call drew my attention to a Large Cuckoo-shrike which landed on a peepal, though I could not see it afterwards. A pair of Pariah Kites floated and twisted effortlessly in the air, and I recalled Sir Landsborough Thomson's remark that kites look much larger than they actually are because of the manner in which they hold their wings. These birds had quite prominent underwing patches so perhaps they belonged to the migrant race. Common Swallows were pursuing their aerial prey, but what delighted me was a pair of Wire-tailed Swallows on a telegraph wire. In the bright light the snow-white fronts of these birds and the other glistening colours of brown and steel blue are a fine combination.

Bangalore abounds with two exotic species of trees, *Cassia siamea* and *Eucalyptus longicornis*. Both these are favoured by white-eyes. The sight of groups of these birds communicating sweetly with one another sibilantly (if that is the word), hanging upside down, and stretching out into the fluffy white flowers of the eucalyptus is a sight from which once cannot tear oneself away. White-eyes are in my view the pleasantest denizens of Bangalore.

Another group of birds which has rather excited me are the White Wagtails. Every evening 150 birds come to a maidan near the Sankey Tank to have a bath. They bathe by turns, a dozen at a time. I put up a hide and have taken some pictures which will be reproduced in the Letter of the Month which the World Wildlife Fund intends bringing out from Bangalore. I will gladly send copies to anyone interested.

[The Large Green Barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*) was recently (June 1994) (re?)discovered in the Bannerghatta National Park area. Within the city premises, the species seen is the Small Green Barbet (*Megalaima viridis*).]

All the world's my nest

by Zafar Futehally

The factors connected with the distribution of birds on our planet is an absorbing subject. Though they are such mobile creatures they are very dependent on climatic conditions - humidity, rainfall, temperature, maximum and minimum hours of sunlight and, of course on the vegetation, topography and the insect population of the area. It is obvious that a fish eating bird must reside near the sea, a river or a lake and a woodpecker in wooded country, but within these broad categories, there are instances of species living in limited localities, which are not found in seemingly similar areas within flying distance.

In the case of mammals, when a group of deer, for example, does not extend its range beyond its traditional boundaries, ecologists suspect that the governing cause is the lack of trace elements in the soil, which results in the vegetation not having the required nutrition. Similarly, birds must also be influenced by certain physical factors not apparent to humans.

Birds arrived rather late on our planet, just a million and a half years ago, and the first bird species to evolve from reptilian stock was *Archaeopteryx lithographica*, discovered through its imprint in the limestone quarries of Bavaria in 1861. According to Pierce Brodkorp, a researcher in the University of Florida, since the arrival of *Archaeopteryx*, over 1,634,000 species have been born and of these only 8650 survive today. Only those have survived, which were able to adapt themselves over the centuries to the physical conditions of the region where they exist, and to withstand predation from other forms of life around them.

Most birds have to come on land for breeding and since most of the land lies north of the equator, the majority of birds are concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere. The mainly pelagic species shearwaters, petrels, albatrosses, pelicans and penguins are found in the Southern Hemisphere. Only one of the 15 species of Penguins is found north of the equator, the icy shores of Antarctica being their favoured habitat.

It is a rather intriguing fact that all the orders of birds are cosmopolitan. As we know there are 27 orders, ranging from the gaviiformes (loons) to passeriformes (perching birds). Representatives of each order are found in every continent, though naturally the more specialized families and genera may be absent. This widespread distribution from a central point to various parts of the world is known as radiation.

Sir Landsborough Thompson writes, "Geographical distribution may be considered as the result of a process of radial dispersal of groups of species from the areas in which they originated in the course of evolution. The history of this radiation, however, is largely a matter of speculation, and in many respects impossible to unravel". Impossible to unravel presumably because the physical shape of the continents has been changing over geological periods. Some land masses contiguous at one time have split into several bits and pieces, and land birds which

would otherwise have spread much more widely over the globe, have remained isolated being unable to cross the sea barrier.

Strangely, even moderate expanses of water deter some land birds from crossing them. I remember that in the early '50s the now defunct "Ecological group" operating in Bombay was surprised at the presence of Jungle Babblers on Elephanta Island which entails a flight of seven miles over the ocean. These babblers are weak flyers, and how they managed the crossing is a mystery. On the other hand, "there are five independently descended species on Tristan da Cunha, some 2000 miles from the nearest mainland, while many species widespread on the American continents are absent from the West Indies."

So, all we can say is that some birds manage to colonize different areas while others do not wish to be involved in this hazard. In recent times, man has been making life difficult for birds and their ranges have been artificially reduced. But some species are strongly attached to their time honoured habitats and I have often wondered at the congregation of waders, gulls and terns in the Mahim creek in Bombay where both the chemical effluent from tanneries, and the organic filth from the slums continues to pollute the waters.

The reason perhaps is that most of these migrants which get a chance to cleanse their systems when they are away in their breeding grounds between May and September. It must be remembered of course, that sewage, if not too heavy, improves food conditions for fish, and hence for birds, because it contains nitrogen, phosphorous and other fertilizing elements.

But birds dependent on aerial insects are as may be expected very susceptible to air pollution. This fact has been well documented by ornithologists in the UK. After passing of the clean air act, 1956, and its remarkably successful implementation, there was clear evidence that such species as the House Martin (*Delichon urbica*) and the Swift (*Apus apus*) dependant on hawking insects in the air had made "further penetrations on the edges of the Inner London Area". Since then, the almost total removal of smog from London has led to a spectacular revival of its bird life, and there is as much fish and bird life on the Thames now, as there ever was.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the poet William Morris wrote:

"Forget six countries overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small and white and clean."

Now after a hundred years, Morris' dream is coming true.

With men taking over charge of the biosphere, several species of birds are being artificially translocated to other regions. This is done for aesthetic, sporting or culinary reasons. But a species will only survive in a new location if there is a vacant ecological niche where it can live - otherwise, it will be hounded out by the locals.

Writing about the British experience, Richard Fitter says, "It is clear that certain conditions are necessary for an introduction of any species into alien territory to succeed. The most important is the existence of a vacant ecological niche. The British Isles contain a comparatively large number of such niches, for its flora and fauna are poorer than that of continental Europe because of the comparatively short time that has elapsed between the final retreat of the ice, around 11000 years ago. This is why such species as the Little Owl, filling a niche for a small diurnal bird of prey and the Canada Goose filling a niche for a large aquatic bird breeding on waters in open woodland or parkland have been able to establish themselves."

Our country is so rich in bird life that there are no such vacant niches. All that we have to do is to ensure that the habitat requirements of our own species is carefully identified and preserved.

The bird that revels in Urban disorder

by **Zafar Futehally**
Indian Express

Last month, I wrote about herons. Today, I will deal with egrets which are a closely related group; in fact the Reef Heron belongs to the genus *Egretta*. The grouping of birds, apparently similar in appearance and behaviour in different genera is based on obscure evolutionary findings, as well as on internal anatomical differences which are mystifying to the layman. The scientific name of the Reef Heron is *Egretta gularis*, while the Cattle Egret is not even in the genus *Egretta*. It is in a category of its own, and its scientific name is *Bubulcus ibis*. Without worrying further about this incomprehensible caste system, let us talk about them in comprehensible terms.

There are four species of egrets in India, and all of them are found all over the country. The Cattle Egret is the most common of all, and identification is easy because it has black legs and a yellow bill. All the other egrets have black bills. Always a good looking creature, it becomes particularly handsome in the breeding season, during the rains,

when it acquires a chestnut gloss on its head, neck and back. Sometimes they nest in colonies of their own, and I once watched a colony in Bombay on a tamarind tree by the side of a busy road. The traffic and the general urban disorder around did not bother the birds. What impressed me was that in building or renovating their nests, the birds did not utilise any material, either branchlets or leaves from the tree they were nesting in; instead they flew a 100 yards away to another tamarind tree from which nesting material was collected. In this way, the nesting tree remained in full foliage and provided good cover to the nests, much needed when the nestlings arrived. The highway passing alongside the Santa Cruz airport in Bombay, still flanked in places by sullage farms and buffalo stables contains hundreds of these gorgeous birds as well as their nesting colonies; and were it not for the fact that common species seldom become the cynosure of our eyes, we would take time to watch the graceful activity of these birds. Sometimes, cattle egrets build in colonies composed entirely of their own species. There is a report about one which "contained over 400 nests; (and) they were almost impossible to count as they covered one another from sight." Sometimes several species of egrets build in mixed colonies containing not merely egrets, but cormorants and others.

Referring to one such colony, Stuart Baker writes: " within a 100 yards was a busy railway junction, and all around were village houses, school etc. In the tank washermen washed, and all sorts of people bathed; in the school the boys and girls recited their lessons out loud in unison and all around the village carried on its usual business. All this interested the various birds not one scrap and they courted, mated, built their nests, laid their eggs and quarrelled in exactly the same way they would have done had there been no vestige of humanity within miles of them." So we see that egrets, like so many other avian species are adapting well to the human environment.

Cattle Egrets have had an interesting history. They first evolved in Africa (so the geological and fossil data reveal) and then radiated to the Asian continent, perhaps during the period when Africa and Asia were one land mass known as Gondwanaland. Sometime in the early years of this century, a few birds landed in South America, and since then has been steadily advancing northwards to the US. In our country, they move along with cattle, feeding on the flying insects disturbed by bovine hooves; in America they follow horses on the ranches, and appear to be quite happy in their newly adopted habitat. It is strange that so many species from the old world have been able to establish themselves and sometimes multiply to pest proportions in the new world. Obviously, there are many ecological niches still uninhabited in the new world, where migrants from the old find easy sustenance. The problems created by introductions is a subject by itself which I will not now refer.

The Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) is very similar to the cattle egret, and in the non-breeding season it is difficult to tell the two species apart; but in flight the unusual colour of the feet of the former, half black, half yellow is a useful mark of identification. It is usually found near water; but curiously though sometimes "in tidal estuaries, mudflats and backwaters, hardly ever (on) the sea shore". These instances are a revelations of the extreme selectivity of habitat of many bird species. The Little Egret was once extensively farmed for its ornamental plumes. It bred well in captivity, and at the appropriate time the plumes were painlessly removed. "Round about the year 1914 the feathers fetched .. as much as 15 Pounds per ounce when smuggled to Europe, a trade which was apparently practised on a large scale by specialists in the business". But fashions have changed; women no longer favour feathers in their hats, and egret farming has disappeared.

The Smaller Egret (*Egretta intermedia*) is also known as the Median Egret, presumably because it is an inch longer (26 inches as against 25 inches of the little one). This too is closely associated with water, both fresh and saline, and like its cousins is found throughout the subcontinent.

That leaves us with the Eastern Large Egret (*Ardea alba*). It is a much larger bird than the other three described above, being 36 inches long, the size of the the grey heron. Egrets are extremely deceptive as to size and depending on whether the neck is extended or retracted, or turned around, the Large Egret could be mistaken for the Median one. Like the others, it is a colonial nesting species, and though it nests freely near human habitations and is an easy bird to watch, its incubation period, as in the case of so many of our common birds, is unrecorded. It is reportedly 25-26 days.

There are eight species of Egrets in the world, and all of them are either white or have a white colour phase. Because of this they are familiar birds, both in temperate and tropical lands, Their nesting colonies, either by themselves, or in association with others are always a beautiful sight. It is a pity though that that their voices are so unmelodious. Fortunately for them, however, they know the virtues of silence.

It's hard work catching flies

by Zafar Futehally
Indian Express

Flycatchers are literally catchers of flies- in which category we may include mosquitoes, bees and similar forms of life. Knowing their diet, we can imagine their habits and behaviour. To begin with, the birds must always position themselves so as to get a good view of tiny flying morsels. Therefore flycatchers are usually on a post or an outside branch with a good view. The keynote of their flight style is maneuverability, and they can twist and turn with incredible dexterity while chasing their prey.

Flycatchers belong to the family *muscipidae*, and because of their special attributes, have been placed in a sub-family of their own, *muscipinae*. There are, according to present classification, 378 species of flycatchers in the

world, and 38 species are found in India. Strangely, no flycatcher has successfully invaded the western hemisphere all of them live in the old world. Since they feed almost entirely on flying insects, they have to exert themselves a great deal to earn a living. Some of the cleverer ones are exploring easier ways of procuring a meal "like gleaning insects from the foliage in warbler or vireo fashion." In India the majority of the flycatchers are found in the mountains, the Himalayas and the Western Ghats, but a few descent to the plains in winter or reside there, and the birds which I have seen quite often are the Fantail Flycatcher, the Paradise Flycatcher, the Greyheaded Flycatcher, the Redbreasted Flycatcher, Tickells blue Flycatcher and the Blacknaped Blue Monarch Flycatcher.

Undoubtedly the Paradise Flycatcher is the most gorgeous of the lot, and because of its striking appearance we can overlook its unmusical call, a single grating "chek" which alerts one to the fact that one is around. A male of this species, with its full-length snow-white tail feathers and velvety back crest, must hold the attention of the most prosaic of men. I used to visit an area in the Borivli National Park specially to see this bird. It was a delightful evergreen biotope consisting of a stream overhung by giant mango trees. In this cool and dark auditorium, the long trailing tail feathers of the Paradise Flycatcher weaving in and out of the foliage seemed to me the highest expression of the artistry of nature. It is our good fortune that this splendid bird lives happily even in semi-urban surroundings if only it is assured that it will not be molested. Even when the suburbs of Bombay were so urbanized that we decided to migrate, a Paradise Flycatcher did occasionally visit our garden.

Another bird which I watched in our garden in Bombay was the White spotted Fantail Flycatcher (*Rhipidura albicollis*). Waltzing on a branch with its tails spread out, and a lovely nine note song accompanying the movement, it provided an audio-visual effect which would be difficult to excel. Though a somewhat modestly coloured smoky brown bird, its prominent white eyebrows catch the eye, and its aerial flights after winged prey are performances no ballerina can emulate. Also, the fact that it is so friendly gives one the opportunity to admire it for long periods. In spite of continuously being attacked by crows, it is remarkable how often it successfully rears a family, and launches it safely into the world.

Once I saw a battle between a crow and a nesting pair of these flycatchers. The nest had been broken and the nestlings were on the ground. I repaired the nest with tape and placed the three juveniles back in their home. It was a great joy to see them survive. The factor which enables these birds to keep crows at bay is obviously their exceptional agility. Yet that a bird the size of a sparrow should be able to defend itself against a creature three times its size is a surprise. It attacks crows by pecking at their heads in flight which is insulting as well as painful. Quite often a crow was remorselessly chased until it was a good 100 feet away from the nest.

Flycatchers, like many other species, very wisely take the precaution of building close to a drongo's nest whenever possible, for the drongo is the arch enemy of all crows and it is the one species with which crows can take no liberties. Flycatchers are competent builders and the nest is a beautifully constructed cup, heavily plastered with cobwebs and placed in the fork of a branch. Both parents share domestic duties including building the nest, incubation and feeding the young. But since this is still a male's world, the females do most of the work.

On December 1, I found a Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa latirostris*) in our garden in Bangalore. It was hunting insects among the lower branches of a Mango tree (its favourite habitat) and often descended to the ground for a kill. Some flycatchers hunt in the top canopy of trees, some in the middle storey and some like this brown flycatcher in the ground floor. Apparently, the specialized insect fauna on which the birds live are found at different heights among the trees. I recognized the Brown Flycatcher from its large dark eyes, its movements, and its habit of returning to the same spot on the branch after every foraging expedition. The bird is found in many parts of India, but its breeding range has not been determined and news about its nesting would be welcome.

As I have said in an earlier column, the separation of birds into different groups is often arbitrarily done. In the case of some flycatchers, it is felt that they could well be included in the genera of warblers. An interesting case is of the Black and Orange flycatcher in the Nilgiris (*M. nigrorufa*) which is being intensively studied to determine whether it should be classified with warblers, because its feeding habits are more akin to those of warblers than of flycatchers. When outward behavior leaves one in doubt, laboratory analysis of the eggs of birds provides the final clue. This is what is being done to determine the status of this bird.

The Greyheaded, the Redbreasted and the Blacknaped Blue Flycatcher are all birds which are a treat to watch, and apart from the grace of their movements, their large lively eyes, designed to see the tiniest object at a fair distance are particularly appealing.

The flight of Herons

by Zafar Futehally

For the birdwatcher, herons are a very satisfactory species. They are large birds which give plenty of opportunity to view them unhurriedly. They are a group belonging to the *Ardeidae* family, and are close relatives of egrets and bitterns, all of which are placed in the ornithological order of *Ciconiiformes*. Their necks and bills account for much of their dimension, and what is worth noting is that the neck has got a kink half way, which enables it to be flattened and it is only when the birds lunge out at the prey that one realizes what a long and effective instrument they possess for killing their prey.

The heron which city dwellers are most likely to come across is the Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). These birds are gregarious and sometimes roost in colonies of their own which may consist of over a hundred individuals. They select a grove of trees as their roost, sometimes, right in the middle of a city and in Bangalore, the garden of the late Sir C.V.Raman is the home of a large breeding colony, which has been breeding here for several decades. The birds doze throughout the day, but in the evening, with clockwork regularity at around 7 PM these days (middle September) they leave the roost in groups of twos or threes, or even singly, and fly to a marsh or a lake or an estuary for communal feeding.

When we were in Bombay, the kwak kwak of the flighting birds was heard every evening as they went for feeding to the backwaters of Juhu. Here in Bangalore again we see them as they go over to the Dodda Gubbi lake, even though it is now only a puddle of no more in size than a tennis court. I counted a group of 37 birds recently and this shows how much food a small bit of water contains.

There are 10 species of herons in India of which the commonest are the grey, the purple, the reef heron, the pond heron and the night heron. Herons appear to be equally at home both on our beaches and in inland freshwater wetlands. Every year I enjoyed the sight of a solitary Grey Heron in an estuary behind Kihim beach, not far from where the Thai Vaishat Project is now located. In Bangalore again, a bird is often seen feeding on an inland tank. These tall, lanky stork-like birds, head and shoulders above the rest of the waders are very wary, and are useful as security guards for the other avians of the congregation.

Incidentally the Grey Heron the only species of heron in England has played an important part in monitoring the purity of the waters.

It is assumed that this bird which lived on fish and molluscs would have a stable population if the food supply was satisfactory, and if the fish and other forms of aquatic life on which it feeds are not destroyed or reduced by pollution. The careful recordkeeping by volunteers of the British Trust for Ornithology showed that there were about 4600 pairs in 1972, and the numbers go down after a severe winter.

These surveys initiated by Max Nicholson in the '50s are a tribute to the enthusiasm and competence of British birdwatchers. What pleasanter way can there be of monitoring the environment than through the medium of birds? The most prominent sign of the cleaning up of the Thames was the return of many bird species which had disappeared when the river was polluted. Our own Central Ganga Authority which has undertaken the colossal task of cleaning up this river, might well press into service a group of birdwatchers who would keep tabs on the improved bird life on the river as pollution is abated.

A rather interesting species among our herons is the Indian Reef Heron (*Egretta gularis*). It has two colour phases, pure white and bluish grey with a white throat patch. It is not easy to differentiate between the small egret and the white form of this heron. The reef heron is usually found on the sea coast, often standing on a rock with the waves splashing all around it. What is the evolutionary significance of the two colour phases of the reef heron? Is polymorphism an advantage or a disadvantage?

There are many kinds of polymorphism, but we are now talking only of two or more colour phases in the case of the Reef Heron. Standing on a rock in the sea, the grey colour phase is much less visible than the white one, and other things being equal the grey form will have better chances of survival than the white one. We have all heard about the importance of protective colouration in birds, and this experiment with chickens in the Cold Spring Harbour Institute of Experimental Evolution is worth noting. Of a flock of 300 chickens, 240 were either black or white. Sixty were spotted and much less conspicuous than the others. In a short time of their being left in the open, 24 were killed by predators, but of these only one was spotted. The survival value of being spotted and, therefore, being less visible to the enemy is obvious.

Birdwatchers are normally disdainful of looking at common species, on the principle of our commercial civilisation that anything which is plentiful must also be cheap. And so it is with birds. The Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) is found everywhere in India where there is the slightest sign of water, fresh or brackish. But in spite of its commonness, it is well worth observing. Its patience is phenomenal as can be seen from the way it stays put in the seemingly most awkward positions, checking itself in midstrike so as not to scare away a possible morsel, be it terrestrial or air borne. Its protective colouration is admirable, the brown wings merge beautifully with the ground. But in flight, taking out a pair of white wings from its pocket, the Pond Heron is quite conspicuous. Its maroon back during the breeding season is very striking and then it no longer comes under the category of drab birds. Pond Herons are supposed to pair for life, but how strange that we do not know this for a fact, even in the case of a bird whose activities can be so easily studied. Here is a possible project for our growing band of birdwatchers.

Birdwatcher's Bane

Zafar Futehally

Indian Express, April 5 1987

The classification of birds into separate families has often posed serious problems to ornithologists particularly when the life styles of a group approximate to those of other groups, though morphologically they may have their own separate characters. Some warblers for example, resemble some thrushes and flycatchers so closely that they cannot be given a separate family status and can only be placed in the large family *Muscicapidae*, and in the sub-family for warblers *Sylviinae*. A colossal number of warblers arrive in India during the migratory season but they are a most trying species for the birdwatcher. Their light green, olive, pale brown and cream colours integrate closely with the

foliage and if they were still, they would be unseen. It is only their incessant activity which indicates that some form of life is around. They are small birds, the smallest being just 3-1/2 inches and their penchant for being on the insides of trees and shrubs makes identification still more difficult. In fact there have been tragicomic situations when ornithologists (friends over a lifetime) have temporarily been on non-speaking terms with each other because of disagreement about the identity of a particular *phylloscopi*. Fortunately, I am not of a calibre to enter into these hair splitting arguments, and I just enjoy the sight of warblers which arrive in our garden. One arrives in our garden in November and all I can claim is that it is a leaf warbler.

The subfamily *Sylviinae* comprises 304 species worldwide, and India can lay claim to 88 of these. The migrations of these small feeble looking birds is astounding. "Arctic warblers breeding in Northern Scandinavia, Russia or Western Siberia must cover roughly 8000 miles twice a year to and from Indonesia, the Philippines and New Guinea." Obviously these vast distances have to be covered to enable these insect eating birds to find suitable food for themselves among the leaves of evergreen as well as deciduous forests, when northern areas under snow provide them with no food. Their return journey, the spring migration, can be closely related to the warming up of northern lands. The birds return to their breeding grounds with "the northward shift of the isotherm of somewhat less than 48 F on a broad front throughout Europe."

One member of the *Sylviinae* which visits India, and which we have been lucky to have in our garden both in Bombay and Bangalore, is the Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*). It is a bird slightly smaller than a sparrow, grey brown above, creamy white below, with a white throat and a pale eyebrow. It is a singleton, and what gives it away is its loud metallic *chuck chuck* calls. Like all warblers it has to work hard for a living and is on the move the whole time catching tiny insects from the interfaces of leaves. It prefers shrubs to trees and so usually not being too high up, sometimes provides a good view. At least one bird is seen in our orchard every season.

A close cousin of Blyth's Reed warbler is the Indian Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus stentoreus*). I recall seeing this bird in the mangrove bushes of Mahim Creek in Bombay, and also at Revas Bunder across the harbour. It has a wonderful lucid call, most cheering to hear, rendered as *Kara kara kara kara keet keet*. It has the same colouring as Blyth's, but is a larger bird, about the size of a bulbul. Unlike Blyth's which is distributed all over India in winter, *stentoreus* keeps to marshy areas containing suitable reed beds. Apart from areas along our western seaboard, it has many other favoured habitats including the reed beds of the Dal lake in Srinagar.

These two species are skulkers and do not like to be seen, but fortunately do not mind being heard. But the Ashy Wren Warbler (*Prinia socialis*) is not averse to exposing itself. Smaller than a sparrow it is attractively coloured with an ashy grey head and back, creamy underneath, and a reddish eye. It often keeps to the tops of bushes, flicking its tail to the accompaniment of its unmistakable *teen teen teen*. It makes a beautiful nest and when discovered in the process of nest building, might move the building blocks to another site - equally exposed.

Mortality is high and this small bird is often parasitized by the Plaintive cuckoo, a bird three times its size. We have watched the families of several Ashy wren warblers come to grief as a result of attacks by crows, crow pheasants and lizards. I suspect that this species is not doing very well, for in several localities where it was commonly seen before, it seems to have disappeared.

It is said that a bird in hand is worth several in the bush, and warblers, because they lack sharp claws and beaks and have a lovely soft plumage, are pleasant birds to handle. During a bird ringing expedition in Saurashtra we netted several species of warblers, mainly the Orphean warblers (*Sylvia hortensis*) and the Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*). *Hortensis* is a handsome bird about the size of a sparrow, dark grey with a white throat and a black cap. Both species ringed in September 1961 and released were subsequently recaptured in September 1962 - another confirmation of the fact that many birds like to return to the same plot of land every year after their long journey.

One member of the warbler family seen all over India wherever there is tall grass along the edges of tanks and marshy areas, as well as agricultural lands is the Streaked Fantail Warbler (*Cisticola juncidis*). It is smaller than a sparrow and its brown colours are boldly streaked with black. Again like most warblers, it gives you no opportunity to have a good look at it since it keeps flitting from one bush to another keeping near the ground. During the breeding season coinciding with the monsoon months, when there is good ground cover, it flies high up and its characteristic call *zit zit zit* has been likened to the call of a barber's scissors. It sometimes builds its nest on the stems of Ragi, but the new high yielding hybrids have very short stems, and ecologically must be disliked by the birds. The white spotted tail is an ornament well used in the breeding season to attract its mate.

An untidy homemaker

by Zafar Futehally

(Indian Express, 6 October 1985)

This is a bad year, weatherwise, for Karnataka, and the north Bangalore district, where we stay has, upto August 24 received only 207 mm of rain. Last year on the same date, the total was 630 mm. It is not surprising, therefore, that munias, birds dependent on grass seed for food, which were plentiful last year, are not to be seen at all in the

locality. We all hope that the north-east monsoon, scheduled to commence about mid-September, will make up for the failure of the south-west monsoon.

Munias belong to the family *Ploceidae* (weaver birds) but are placed in a separate sub-family, *Estrilinae*, presumably because they are not true weavers in the true sense of the word, as their large untidy globular nests reveal. This group has the distinction of having an introduced species, the Java Sparrow (*Padda oryzivora*), and though it appears to be acclimatised in Calcutta and Madras, its breeding habits are not described in our territory. The fact that "it is not spreading significantly" is a mercy because exotic introductions very often cause severe ecological problems. Unlike many other countries, our bird and animal life has retained its indigenous purity, though unfortunately our vegetation has become a hotch potch of many countries, and the deleterious consequences of this are well known.

Of the seven indigenous species found in India, the commonest are the Spotted Munia, the White-throated, the Black-headed and the White-backed. As may be expected, these varieties have their own habitat preferences: the Black-headed being partial to low lying swampy areas and the white-throated being more at home in the drier portions of our country. A rather elegant species, popular as a cage bird and exported in large numbers, is the Red Munia or the Avadavat. The name "Avadavat" is a corruption of Ahmedabad from where the birds were first sent out to the Britishers of the East India Company in Surat.

All Munias build untidy nests, and to save themselves the trouble of building, some of them attempt to occupy any abandoned nest within a colony of weaver birds. Surprisingly, a nest has even been found within the pile of sticks of an eagle's nest, but whether the occupants survived to tell the tale is unknown. Ornithologists suggest that the inclination to appropriate the nests of other birds, is an incipient form of parasitism which may later lead the species to become full-fledged parasites - they then foist their eggs and subsequent responsibilities on the hosts. This has apparently happened with some weaver birds in Africa. It is worth recording that in one case, a munia's eggs have been found in the nest of a house sparrow, and birdwatchers in India should be on the lookout for instances of this kind. It may lead to significant findings in course of time.

Munias are very social birds and unless preoccupied in feeding or preening, they like to stay closely huddled together. The stiff-legged courtship dance of the males, consisting of leaps upwards, returning to the same spot each time, is a comic performance, which has entertained and been written about by many birdwatchers including Malcolm Macdonald, when he was the British High Commissioner in New Delhi.

But the best account of the nesting of Spotted Munias has been by Miss Cockburn from the Nilgiris. At one time, there were as many as 14 nests on the trellis of her verandah, and she kept careful records of day-to-day events: "In selecting a place to build on, they sit on a twig and, raising themselves as high as possible, flap their wings over their backs to ascertain that no small branches are likely to obstruct the progress of their building. When perfectly satisfied as to the convenience of the spot, the female remains there while the male flies to a short distance, alights on the ground and breaking off a piece of fine long grass, flies back with it to the female, and continues to bring her at least one piece a minute while she carries on the building process alone."

It is expected that all species of birds would commence their nest building at a time when the specific food on which the parents and the young are dependent is adequately available. In case of seed eaters like the munias, August-September is the period in India when conditions are most favourable for them. To determine the likely indicators of the approach of the favourable period, Dr Asha Chandola carried out experiments under controlled conditions with Spotted Munias, first at Benares Hindu University and later at Garhwal University. "In the predominantly monsoon climate of the Indian subcontinent, the selective advantage of breeding during and after the monsoon, when food is maximally available in nature is obvious. But curiously, it seems that gonadal development is at a maximum when the food intake is at the lowest. Keeping in mind their hectic reproductive activities (courtship, nest building, incubation, feeding the young), a low calories intake during the breeding period as shown by these birds is understandable. But it is intriguing that birds should begin to eat less prior to gonadal growth. Possibly the variation in food availability in the field is perceived by the birds, and it is not inconceivable that the scarcity of food availability itself may seem to predict the oncoming season." Most interestingly, Chandola found that under captive conditions when the birds had access to foodgrains throughout the day and the year, they exhibited seasonality in food intake in accordance with food availability in nature. The response of birds to environmental conditions has evolved over millions of years, and it is therefore understandable that the Spotted Munia could not be persuaded to alter its food habits under artificial conditions.

Munias are caught in thousands by bird trappers for sale as cage birds both in India and abroad. It is important that careful monitoring of their population is done before export quotas are established by the Department of Wildlife and Forests. For one thing, with the rapid decline of our grazing areas, and conversion of meadows into farm lands, our seed eating avifauna may find life difficult in the years to come.

Keeping track of birds

by Zafar Futehally

Indian Express, 8th October 1983

Conservationists have fallen into the habit of making gloomy predictions about calamities in store if ecological considerations are disregarded in planning. But we must not forget Barbara Ward's advice that we have a duty to

hope, and so as a birdwatcher, though I am sorry to see that some species are no longer seen in Bangalore, I hope that appropriate measures will be taken to ensure their revival.

In the last 10 years that I have been here there has been a steady decline in the numbers of one of our songsters, the magpie robin or dhayal. It could be that setting up suitable nesting boxes in gardens and parks will help this species to multiply. I would be glad to offer suggestions to anyone interested.

We first settled down in Palace Orchards and in 1973 the place was of course, far more open than it is today and I have the pleasantest memories of many species seen in this locality. Undoubtedly the calls of the Large Green Barbet 'korr...kutroo... kutroo...' cannot be missed by anyone who has the least interest in the outdoors, and it is fun trying to locate this grass green bird whose colours merge so completely with the foliage of trees. Its scientific name is *Megalaima zeylanica*. Its call has a ventriloquistic quality, and it is difficult to tell from which direction it comes.

The birds must have been amused by my vain attempts to locate them by following the direction of their calls. They are entirely arboreal and never descend to the ground - what on earth for, they might well say when they are frugivorous, and can get all the berries and fruits they need without coming to the ground.

Barbets are usually found singly or in small groups, but the whole population of an area keeps in touch with one another by their constant calls. They are not very vocal in winter, but get very noisy in the hot weather, and whenever there is an unusual sound, like for example the shot of a gun, the entire population start their chorus and seem to be come agitated. Unfortunately, this bird does a lot of damage to the coffee plantations in Mysore, and since it is not an insect eater it does not compensate for the damage it does to the crop, as so many birds in fact do, by eating other insect pests and keeping their population down.

In a sense, therefore, the bird is an expensive ornament of our environment, though undoubtedly there are several ways in which it plays its role in maintaining the balance of nature. It would be profitable, if such a study was made as an ecological exercise. It is said that in the past few decades the bird has become conspicuously common in Delhi because of the planting of a large number of ficus trees. When we do our planting in Bangalore, we must not forget the requirements of birds.

A species of bird which we enjoyed very much in the Palace Orchards were white eyes, known scientifically as *Zosterops palpebrosa*. The sexes are alike and there are no seasonal changes in plumage. They live in trees and bushes, have a wide range of food: insect, nectar, and fruits. According to Landsborough Thompson both parents incubate and hatching takes place in less than eleven days which is the shortest period known among birds. Lovelier creatures are difficult to find, and in the sibilant whispers by which the whole flock continuously keeps in touch with one another is testimony to the cohesion of the group. They are always together, and the energetic manner in which they inspect a tree for insects, hanging upside down whenever necessary and peering into every leaf and bud, must make it very difficult for any insect to survive. Operations of this kind by flocks of birds indicate how effectively they play their part in keeping insect populations under control. We never saw white eyes in our garden in Bombay which is surprising because it a fairly common resident species in Maharashtra. So meeting it in Bangalore was doubly welcome.

Some birds prefer to keep to themselves, and who can blame them. At best they tolerate only the near presence of their mates. The pied bushchat (*Saxicola caprata*) is one such bird. It is commonly seen in open areas in Bangalore , and it makes its presence felt by perching on top of an isolated bush and calling loudly.

The black and white plumage of the male is most becoming and the female is more sedately dressed in greys and browns as is the case among the females of many song birds. The pied bushchat cannot be classified as a singer of any quality, but it is extremely keen to bust into some sort of song, like many amateurs of human society are prone to do, without ever quite succeeding in producing a melody.

I would like to digress here for a minute to discuss why birds sing. Song birds sing because they want to indicate to their male rivals that during the breeding season they wish to be in possession of a suitable area around their song posts. This ensures that every family has a minimum area of land from which they can feed the young chicks, for when they arrive in the world, they have a voracious appetite which lasts through the growing period. If there are two males who wish to take possession of the same plot of land then there is a conflict, but the birds sensibly do not fight with beak and claw, but by means of their song, and the songster who can sing the loudest wins.

Occasionally there is physical combat, but as a rule this is not necessary. Nature believes in protecting its creation, and therefore , as Konrad Lorenz has pointed out, ensures that threat postures are respected by adversaries, and destructive internecine strife is avoided. Humans too are now, hopefully learning this lesson, and the two super powers are satisfied by building up their arsenals of atomic weapons past the overkill limit, and merely glare at each other across the oceans.

There is a classic study by David Lack on the robin, and he points out that in human society too martial music played an important part in days gone by. Marco Polo's description of Kublai Khans's engagement is typical: 'As soon as the order of battle was arranged, and infinite number of wind instruments of various kinds were sounded, and these were succeeded by songs, according to the custom of the Tartars before they engage in fight, which commences upon the signal given by the cymbals and drums, and there was such a beating of cymbals and drums , that it was wonderful to hear and then a fierce and bloody conflict began.'

One rather interesting sight which we used to see in the migratory season when we stayed at Palace Orchards was the congregation of wagtails in the evening near Sankey Tank. There was a small puddle of water in one of the meadows and jut before sunset, hundreds of wagtails of several species including white wagtails, yellow wagtails,

and grey wagtails, congregated near the spot. They went to have a bath in turn in a very orderly fashion, and after the bath they spent considerable time preening their feathers.

Thereafter, the entire assembly departed towards their roosts feeling very clean and spruce. I wish our municipal authorities would occasionally identify areas of this kind which are interesting and useful from the point of view of birds and free them from the threat of development. Such micro bird sanctuaries could become places of entertainment and education for the human population.

Unfortunately this particular site has been built upon and the wagtails can no longer have their bath there. In England where there is a growing concern for identification of areas designated as 'Sites of special ornithological interest'. Whenever a rare species of bird is found nesting the site is cordoned off, and no development allowed, unless for very special reasons after the subject has been carefully assessed by knowledgeable people.

In Palace Orchards during our evening walks we came across several roosts of the common house sparrow. This bird hardly attracts any notice because of its commonness, but like all birds it has an interesting life history. For one thing at these noisy roosts or dormitories only the young, unmarried sparrows congregate, or so it is believed. All the birds which have paired, sleep separately around their nesting sites. This statement needs to be verified and here is a subject for some enthusiast to study. There is another interesting aspect relating to the life of the house sparrow. After pairing, if the male happens to be killed, the female is capable of acquiring almost immediately. Dr Salim Ali in his young days carried out an experiment of this kind at the nest of a house sparrow in his stables in Bombay, and was amazed to find that the female was in a position to acquire several husbands in quick succession.

In 1975 we moved away from Palace Orchards, and came to our present house which is about 10 miles away from Bangalore City on the Bagalur Road. In this agricultural area the complex of bird life is somewhat different and the fields and meadows around our house afford a splendid opportunity for watching both resident and migrant birds. A pair of Large Pied Wagtails (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*) make their nests every year inside the pump cover in the well. Unfortunately, they have not been successful because their eggs appear to be eaten by rock lizards of which there are several around. Pied Bushchats too nested in a cavity of the stone structure of the well, but now the well has become completely dry because of the past three bad monsoons and the bush chats do not like to nest inside a dry well.

We planted several species of trees in our garden with the object of attracting birds and it is a great pleasure to find that this policy has succeeded. The Singapore Cherry tree has become a favourite rendezvous for Bulbuls and Koels and the Hibiscus and Homskoldeas are great attractions for sunbirds.

On the grassy edge of the compound, which has been left wild and untended mainly to attract birds, I was thrilled at finding the nest of a Bustard Quail. These birds indulge in their well known drumming calls which simulate to perfection the sound of a motorcycle at a distance. Incidentally this is one of the few species of birds in India which are polyandrous. The female after laying a clutch of eggs foists the incubation and other domestic duties on the husband. We have flocks of both the whitethroated and the spotted munias. Black drongos and Indian Rollers take up positions on the telephone wires, and they seem to have come to an amicable understanding about not crossing each other's path. Common green bee-eaters roost on our apta tree and occasionally a pond heron comes to our pond to investigate if the menu is satisfactory.

Both the migratory common swallow and the resident red-rumped swallow are regularly seen. Roseringed Parakeets are a great nuisance. This is one species whose numbers need to be curtailed by humane killing.

In the migratory season which is now on, it is the harriers which provide the most dramatic spectacle. I saw the first harrier this season on the 29th Sept. From the black wing bars on its silver wings I thought it could be Montagu's Harriers. As Eha says, these birds seem to be able to defy the laws of gravitation and float along on air currents just a couple of feet above the ground in a way which no other birds can.

Knowledge about the life histories of many of our birds is very limited, and all of us have the opportunity to add to this knowledge, if we decide to observe and keep careful notes of the bird life in our immediate surroundings.

Early Birds by Zafar Futehally (Indian Express date unknown)

I had always wanted to have partridges making their home in our garden. They are attractive birds and their lively duet in which the male and female sing different notes which harmonise into what sounds like a single call *Khatija Khatija* (see footnote) is a cheering addition to the sounds of the country side. Last February, through the kindness of the Chief Wildlife Warden of Karnataka, I was able to procure a dozen pairs of the Grey Partridge (*Francolinus pondicerianus*) and release them in our orchard in Bangalore. We didn't hear them until one morning in September. This was at 6 am, and since then almost to the minute, the birds have called at the minute, the birds have called at the same time for a few seconds every day, except when it is raining or cloudy, when they are a few minutes late. This year the rains have been exceptionally good in our district (we have already had 41 " as against last year's 21 ") and we hope that the lush ground cover will provide favourable conditions for multiplying their tribe. In an earlier article I had referred to a flight of Night Herons over our house at almost exactly 7 pm. Salim Ali once observed a Kingfisher flying past a culvert one day. On subsequent days he was able to confirm that the bird flew past this particular point every evening at exactly the same time.

All forms of life are time bound to a certain extent. Darkness and light are the main divisions of the 24 hour cycle of our lives. The movement of the sun dictates their activity, and in the dawn chorus of birds, almost all birds present in the locality join to welcome the light. The remarkable punctuality with which birds leave their breeding grounds in northern climates in autumn, and arrive at their winter quarters in the tropics, sometimes in the same area, on the same day of the year, has been well documented. But their daily routine too, tied to day length and other environmental factors, seem to be organized to the minute.

Sunrise and sunset are undoubtedly times when there is a marked change in the activities of most birds, but diurnal birds do not all become active at the same time. Soaring birds like our vultures, have to wait until the land is heated by the sun, for they need the warm updrafts of air to assist their gliding flight; swifts, swallows and bee-eaters, start their hunting activities rather late in the day, as the insects on which they feed have not left their sleeping quarters till late morning. The smaller birds start their foraging activities earlier, as their food supply is available at the time.

The time of roosting varies for different species. Drongos for example, go to bed rather late, presumably because it takes them many hours of the day to catch the sort of prey they live on. Those birds which have common roosts, like mynas and sparrows, congregate at particular spots just a few minutes before sunset so that they are all safely tucked in before dusk. House swifts ball up in the air and in one fell swoop, at a particular moment, they all land on their roost. I say a good example of this in Rajasthan where, just before sunset, a thousand house swifts hurtled under the structure of a bridge where they spent the night. This sudden and coordinated move into their sleeping quarters is apparently meant to prevent any lurking predator from finding their roost and attacking them while asleep. If a straggling group of birds in small numbers kept arriving at the roost, it would obviously indicate their whereabouts to their enemies.

It can be presumed that procuring the right quantity and quality of food is the principle factor connected with the activities of birds at various times of the day. It has been found, for example that Grey Tits (*Parus major*) provided with large quantities of food artificially, roost earlier than their companions who have to fend for themselves, and so take a longer time to find the required diet for survival.

There is another aspect to be considered when we speak about birds tied to particular times of the day for their feeding, roosting and other activities which have stood them in good stead over millions of years, they have the capacity to be opportunists and take advantage of a sudden change in environmental conditions. During a few days in the year when termites are on the wing on their last flight, a number of species, crows, drongos, rollers, kites, mynas - take advantage of the available feast and extend their time of retirement quite considerably. It would seem, therefore, that sometimes their daily routine is altered- and intelligence takes precedence over instinct.

Some shore birds whose food depends on the movement of the tides, obviously have to wait for the ebb and flow of the sea to find their food at suitable moments at the water's edge. A ten to five office routine would not suit them, and such birds manage to find their food even in the dark by various sensory indications, including the touch of the water on their toes. Waders and wildfowl dependent for food on the sea coast, are often found asleep during the day, and seek their food well after sunset when the position of the tide provides them with suitable feeding conditions.

The nocturnal birds, of course, reverse their timings for they have to hunt at night and rest during the day. They have their own radar equipment for identifying the position of their prey through sound. Owls are supposed to be particularly gifted in this regard. Nightjars have exceptionally large eyes, a wide gape, and their strong bristles near the base of the beak help them catch insects in the dark.

Footnote by L. Shyamal

I was rather curious about the duetting call of the Grey Partridge and wrote to Zafar Futehally, who suggested that I write to M.K.Himmatsinhji for more details. Here is M.K.Himmatsinhji's response.

Jubilee Ground,

Bhuj, Kutch

December 14, 1990

Dear Mr. Shyamal,

Thank you for your letter of the 10th which I received yesterday. I describe the calls of the Grey Partridge as hereunder:

There are two calls of the male and two of the female. The first call of the male (normal call) sounds like *kili kaa kaa kaa kaa*. The second call (semi challenge) is *kilaa kilaa kilaa kilaa*. The female has the main call (ordinary) *kee kee kee*, a sharp mono-syllabic call which can be distinctly heard only when she calls by herself. But the other call is like the males, *kilaa kilaa*, but is uttered in a less sharp and lower tone, which by practice can be distinguished in the field. If you have the opportunity to listen to a caged pair of partridges, it would be easier still. The combined, or synchronised, calls are uttered after the pair-formation between two birds. More often than not, there are more than two birds in a covey (family) of partridge. All, or many, of such birds call together. However in that case the synchronization between the individual birds is not perfect, and one can at once tell, again with some practice, that there are more than two birds involved.

Now, to come back to the main point of your query, in a combined call the *kee* of the female in the males first ordinary call precedes his *kili kaka* to sound like *kiliaak kiliaak kiliaak*, and if the male stops his call before the female, it ends with her *kee* thus *kiliak kiliak kiliak kee*. In the males second, semi-challenge call, the females *kee* comes after the males' beginning *ki* of the call to sound like *kateelaa kateelaa kateelaa*.

When separated from each other, or from the chicks, both the parents utter loud *kuaan kuaan* until they come together. There are softer calls constantly uttered by the birds which are not audible in the wild to the human ear. The pair calls together all the year round and they need not be necessarily close together. Taking a count from the calls is not an infallible method. They have to be physically seen and counted.

You are most welcome to write again for any clarification.

Yours sincerely
sd. Himmatsinhji

Counting your birds Zafar Futehally
Indian Express, 21 February 1988

India participated in the first Asian Waterfowl Count last year, and according to the National Coordinator it was a "limited success in the sense that an interest has been created." During the census, reports from various parts of India were sent in, relating to as many as 21 families and 137 species. As was only to be expected, there were glaring omissions about the existence of many common species in the census returns. Take the instance of the Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*). Only 33 were reported from Kerala and only 15 from Maharashtra. Actually there are several thousands of these birds in each state. The highest number listed of any species of waterfowl was the Pintail (*Anas acuta*), of which the India figure was 69,699.

The second annual census for 1988 is currently underway, and it is bound to provide far more accurate figures than last year, judging from the number of knowledgeable participants. I joined a census party which surveyed the Yelahanka tank in Bangalore in January. When we climbed the bund, the light was perfect with the sun behind us, but birdlife seemed to be scanty. We saw small groups of coot (*Fulica atra*), a few Shovellers (*Anas clypeata*) and Cotton Teal (*Nettapus coromandelianus*), a large block of Cattle Egrets as well as some Median and Little Egrets. There were six Blackwinged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) which gave a glorious performance, as with wings cambered they glided against the blue sky showing up their superb combination of black, white and pink colours. A female Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) circled overhead, and as it swooped towards the water, the coots scampered for safety among the water hyacinths in a corner of the tank. There were two pairs of Pied Kingfishers (*Ceryle rudis*) hovering over the water.

All this was very pleasant but there were no signs of the substantial numbers of duck which we had seen last year, until two members of our group rolled up their trousers and started walking through the water towards the emergent grass at the far end of the lake. Suddenly the scene changed. Large flocks of Garganey (*Anas querquedula*) and Pintail (*Anas acuta*) rose up, surveyed the scene and flew down into the water again. We counted 1972 Garganey and 890 Pintail, which showed that in spite of all the disturbance caused by the dhobies washing clothes against the tank embankment, the large contingent of brick makers going about their business along the periphery, and even a couple of poachers with shotguns, the environment was still acceptable to the birds. It may not remain so for long, unless the pressures abate and the effluents from many factories springing up all around the lake are contained. In fact, there are some prestigious industrial houses in the neighbourhood of the Yelahanka tank: Escorts, Wheel and Axle Plant, Larsen and Toubro. Can they not join hands to restore and preserve a wetland which could become a mini Bharatpur, and become such an asset for the local population?

From Yelahanka we went to Jakkur, where last year we had the pleasure of seeing a pair of White Storks (*Ciconia ciconia*). This is a winter visitor standing 3-1/2 feet high, all white, except for black wings and a most attractive long red bill. There were no storks, but there were a sizeable number of Ruff and Reeve (*Philomachus pugnax*), a solitary Blacktailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) and a single Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*) quite at home with the waders around it.

It must be admitted with regrets that so far our state governments have not understood the values of our wetlands, either as significant components of the hydrology of the area, or as the aesthetic treasures which they are. Birdwatchers all over the world are playing a catalytic role in motivating governments to take conservation measures. Once can only hope this will be the case in India, now that bird watching is flying high and, birders who trudge over various sectors of our natural habitat recognise the connections between them – and know what consequences are of any break in the links of nature. It is not easy to understand which are the essential factors that induce birds to stick to a particular environment, in spite of so many obvious disturbances as we see in the case of Yelahanka. On the other hand sometimes when the habitat has been only slightly altered, as for example by the cutting down of a few trees and shrubs which provided cover, the area is abandoned. Perhaps the avians see the writing on the wall and seek a safer home.

Note from Bangalore Newsletter for Birdwatchers, February 1974, Vol. 14, No. 2

Fifteen birdwatchers of Bangalore assembled at the residence of Mr. Zafar Futehally on 20.1.1974 to discuss the plans and programmes for birdwatching activities in and around Bangalore. This assembly was thanks to the initiative of Dr. V.J. Victor who is the de facto Secretary of the Bangalore bird watching fraternity.

The following points were raised for discussion

1. Mr. Futehally suggested that a checklist of birds of Bangalore and district, i.e. resident, migrant, occasional visitor, etc., may be prepared. Dr. Joseph George pointed out the existence of a publication by Dr. Salim Ali on the birds of the old Mysore state. Dr. Gadgil was requested to prepare a list of birds of Bangalore and adjacent areas on the basis of Dr. Salim Ali's paper. This could form the core of the checklist to be prepared.
2. Mr. Futehally raised the question of bird banding. It was agreed that for the time being Bannerghatta National Park and Raman Research Institute Campus may be selected as sites for bird banding activities. It was suggested that coloured rings may be used to study the range of some commonly occurring birds like the Red whiskered Bulbul.
3. Mr Futehally also suggested that all the bird watchers in Bangalore might keep individual notes on the relationship between birds and the different species of trees, particularly exotic species, on which they are commonly found. Then, once in six months or so all the notes could be compared and it may be possible to draw some generalised conclusion.
4. Mr V. Abraham expressed his interest in Economic Ornithology and asked the group if any bird activities in this line could be taken up for the Bangalore area. It was decided that a few of the representative insect eating birds may be caught and dissected to analyse their stomach contents for determining which insect they preferentially ate and to what extent. The advantages of using birds as pest controlling agents in place of chemical pesticides were noted. Hebbal Agricultural University campus was selected as the site for this purpose and Mrs. Sundari Bai was requested to give the necessary help and entomological expertise required for this purpose.
5. Dr. Joseph George asked the group whether it is possible to find ways and means of encouraging Magpie Robin population in Bangalore and discouraging the population growth of the Jungle Crow. Mr. Futehally narrated the experience of the group at Bombay with respect to the Jungle Crow population and expressed his opinion that it is a fairly difficult job. The group decided to consider this point in greater detail at a later date.
6. It was decided that the first field outing for birdwatching and bird ringing will be to Bannerghatta National Park on Sunday the 3rd February 1974. The group would meet at 2 p.m. on that day near "Cauvery", the Mysore arts and crafts center on Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore

In search of the Himalayan Quail

The Illustrated Weekly of India. July 14-20, 1985

by Pritish Nandy

At 89, most people tend to take it easy. but not Salim Ali, the famous ornithologist, whose crusade for conservation of wildlife is now part of contemporary folklore. For he has spent his entire life trying to protect the environment from industrial marauders and quick buck merchants.

In the process, his reputation as a birdwatcher and natural historian, a fierce warrior for the preservation of all things wise and wonderful has grown. Well beyond the shores of this land. Countless awards have come his way, and recognition from all over the world. This small, demure man quietly entering the ninth decade of his colourful life has virtually become a legend.

In the later part of this year, sometime around late October, Salim Ali now plans to trek in the Himalayas, in search of the mysterious mountain quail.

This particular bird was last seen in 1858. Six or eight specimens were shot by British game hunters in Nainital and Mussoorie, and then suddenly the breed vanished from sight. For over a century. Theories of it being a migrant bird are demolished by Ali, who claims it has not been seen in any neighbouring countries.

Indeed it has never been seen anywhere else in the world.

That is why the indefatigable birdman has decided to track it down in its natural habitat up in the Himalayan range. Come October and he will be there, in shorts, with his topee at a rakish angle, binoculars glued to his eyes, a vintage camera hanging from his neck.

Salim Ali talks to Pritish Nandy about why the search means so much to him. And opens up, in the process, the beautiful and fascinating world of birds: the passion of his life.

He is a small man, frail to look at, with a remarkable resemblance to a bird. His beak-like nose; the way his ears stick out; his voice, small and chirpy. There's an irrepressible quality about him.

At 89, when most people prefer to call it a day and sit back to watch the sun set in the western sky amidst a blazing hue of red and gold, Salim Ali pursues his obsessions. With a fierce devotion.

Enter room number 30 of the famed Yacht Club near the Gateway of India in Bombay and you will see him quietly hiding behind his vast array of books, checking the proofs of his autobiography that Oxford University Press will be

bringing out later this year. The window overlooks the sea and you can watch the pigeons being fed near the Gateway.

If he has the time, he will speak to you. With quick, impatient gestures.

A small man, dressed in white shorts: his thin, reedy legs tightly clasped in stockings. A T-shirt declares his allegiance to the World Environment Day. High-powered spectacles precariously balanced on his beak; hearing aids attached to both ears; his white hair closely cropped. A vintage typewriter on his desk; an ancient camera next to it. And a pair of smart binoculars with his name engraved on them.

That's Salim Ali for you. The internationally celebrated ornithologist, who has won every conceivable award and honour that can go to a conservationist. Including the \$50000 J. Paul Getty award from the World Wildlife Fund, better known as the Nobel Prize for conservation.

Prod him a bit and he will come out with some bit of the most amazing anecdotes about natural history that you are ever likely to hear. If he is happy with you, he might even tell you all those fascinating stories about the people he has met in his life. And the birds. The birds. Yes, that is his obsession. For 80 long years. Ever since he shot a yellowthroated sparrow with an airgun at the age of nine and was curious about its origins, and why it differed from the familiar everyday sparrow.

Age has not dimmed his enthusiasm. In fact, in some ways, it has perhaps even heightened it. Come October and he has plans to trek in the Himalayas in search of the elusive Mountain Quail. A bird not seen for over a century.

A way-out idea ? Perhaps. But for Salim Ali it is a dream he has cherished for years. To track down a rare bird that appears to have vanished into thin air.

The Mountain Quail was last seen in 1878. Some half a dozen such birds were discovered in the hunting bags of a few British marksmen out on a shikar near Nainital and Musoorie. Since then, no one has ever seen the Mountain Quail. No one has a clue whether it exists or not.

He spurns the theory that it may be a migrant bird, which changed its migrating habits when the environment altered over the years. No one has seen the Mountain Quail in any of the neighbouring countries, he declares with quiet confidence. For that matter, no one has seen the bird anywhere else in the world either. Its habitat must be in that part of the Himalayas, he is sure. But does the breed exist any longer ? I am sure it does, he says, but I will be fortunate to spot one and photograph it.

There are many vanishing species of birds in India, he tells me. The pink-headed wild duck for instance. Last seen in the swampy forests of Assam, where one or two would occasionally turn up in hunters' bags till 1935, when it suddenly disappeared from sight. Similarly, the white-winged wood duck, which survived in the same habitat and has gone into hiding for many years now. No one has seen a single specimen.

Then there's the Jerdons courser last seen in the Cuddapah district of South India in 1900 and in parts of Hyderabad state near the Godavari river. Also, Blewitt's owl, which no one has seen since 1914. It used to fly around in the Satpura mountains. The examples are countless, says Salim Ali, as the environment keeps changing and man's fierce onslaught on nature continues unabated.

Not just birds alone. Plants, animals, forests, indigenous life styles all under pressure as the twentyfirst century attacks us with its silicon gods and an unfeeling, bizarre commitment to the totems of conquest. Conquest over one's fellow beings. Conquest over space, nature, the mysteries of life. The one single motivation that spurs us on: to create a brute technology that will give us the power to rule over all that we see around us.

The frail birdman of Apollo Bunder seems to be one of the last of the Mohicans fighting a losing battle against the arrogance of the modern state. Against its nuclear icons, its gospel of progress at any cost; its muscle flexing search for power as the only means of self-confidence in a world where weakness is seen as the ultimate insult.

For years, Salim Ali has been a vagrant of the wilds. He still is. Even as the awards and encomiums pile up. As his books become all-time classics and the world around him puts him on a pedestal.

For him, the search continues. The search of a lonely old man for a dream he knows can never be fulfilled in one lifetime. The search for a better understand of life, for a new sense of moral priorities that can change our way of looking at things. The mountain quail thus becomes a symbol. The last voyage of a great adventurer in search of the Holy Grail.

The Saga of the Birdman

Pritish Nandy profiles the enigmatic Salim Ali

Born on November 12, 1906 in Bombay, in Khetwadi, the now overcrowded area between Girgaum and Charni Road, Salim Ali lost his father when he was just one. His mother died two years later. The youngest in an orphaned family of nine, he was brought up by a maternal uncle. During his school years, when he was nine, he shot a yellowthroated sparrow with an airgun and could not recognise it. He went to his uncle, who sent him to the Bombay Natural History Society and thus began his interest in birds. A story beautifully told in the excerpt from his autobiography that we have carried here.

Ali studied biology in college but did not wait for his degree. For those were the years of the great mining boom in Burma. So he went off and joined the family business in Tenasserim: where they were mining wolfram from which tungsten was obtained for the armor plating during the war.

Returning from Burma after seven years, he took up an assignment as guide lecturer at the Bombay Natural History Society for Rs 350 a month and promptly bored with the job. After sticking it out for two dreary years, in 1920 he took nine months study leave and left for Europe. There, he studied ornithology under the famous Professor Erwin Stresemann at the Berlin University's zoological department.

In 1930, when he came back, he found his job had been abolished. So he hit upon an idea that could afford him his study of birds. On behalf of the princely states of Cochin, Indore, Hyderabad, Bhopal, Travancore and Gwalior he began a series of bird surveys, which yielded enormous research data that later went into famous books.

In 1939, his wife died and the second Great War began. So he moved out of Dehra Dun, where they were living, and returned to Bombay, where he set up home in Pali Hill. After independence he took over as editor of the BNHS Journal and, later, as honorary secretary. Since then, with countless awards and much recognition having come his way for his pathbreaking research, Salim Ali has become a famous person. A sort of folk hero for those believe in the values of conservation and preserving our natural heritage.

For him, it has not been an easy task. Till recent times, few people were interested with the kind of work Salim Ali was doing. But he pursued his cause with single minded devotion and today his message has reached people all over the country. Even the politicians these days are talking about the need for preserving our wildlife and environment !

Why do you want to make this rather ambitious and for someone like you, dangerous journey up in the mountains in search of this elusive bird ?

I have wanted to for years. But something or the other always came up and I had to postpone the expedition. This time, I am determined to go.

To which part of the range ?

Near the Nainital Mussoorie belt. The mountain quail was last seen there over a century back. Some British gamesmen brought back a few- about half a dozen or so- in their hunting bags.

No one has seen the birds since then ?

No, in fact everyone thinks it is extinct. I am not so sure. With some luck I hope to see it.

Couldn't it have changed its habitat ?

Well, that is what people suspect. With industrialization and all that, the environment has been changing so rapidly in the past century that habitats are becoming unrecognisable. That's why the birds are disappearing.

Are there many vanishing breeds?

Several. Why just birds? Animals, plants, flowers, life-styles: everything is under pressure these days. I am not saying that all industrialization is bad. I am not asking them to stop progress. But we must concern ourselves with the environment in a serious way. Otherwise, we will lose our precious natural heritage, our wildlife, our flora and fauna. Everything.

Could the mountain quail have migrated to some neighbouring land ?

I don't think so. No one has sighted it anywhere in the world. Except in this part of the Himalayas.

Could it have been a migratory bird that has stopped coming because of the change in its habitat?

No, no. No one has seen the birds anywhere else in the world. How can anyone arrive at such a theory ? It is a local bird. It lives in the *khuds* up there. We will need dogs-trained dogs-to chase them out of the dense undergrowth.

It is there. I am telling you that. We will have to try hard to bring it out of hiding.

When are you planning to go?

In October this year. I have procrastinated too long. Don't worry; I'll take some of my friends with me. They will help me through the arduous trek. In any case, the challenge of discovering the mountain quail after so many years will see me through the difficult journey.

Don't forget that I've done many such journeys before as a sportsman.

I know. But isn't there an essential dichotomy there ? On the one hand you love birds and have spent an entire lifetime trying to discover more about them. On the other, you are a keen sportsman, celebrating the idea of shikar.

Don't you find this contradictory: killing the same birds you spend so much time trying to find out more about?

No. There is no dichotomy between the two, in my opinion. You are being unnecessarily sentimental. If there are enough birds around and rare species face no imminent threat of extinction, what's wrong with shikar? That's the only way you can collect specimens.

But everyone wants to collect rare specimens, not everyday birds?

The important thing is not to make them rare in the first place.

How can you ensure that ? Misguided sportsmen add to this onslaught.

You have got your priorities wrong. The real threat to our fauna is the destruction of our flora. How does that happen? Because of foolish notions of development and progress. You change entire environments, cut down the forests, destroy the wildlife, flush out the birds: all in the name of industrialization, change. How stupid can man be? Thank god, people are now protesting. Take the example of Silent Valley. They managed to save that. Mrs Gandhi was a great help to the conservation movement. She lent her entire support to the cause, and that is why we survived the onslaught. But for how long? let's see what the new leaders do. Let's watch the kind of support they lend us.

But surely shikar is also dangerous for wildlife? Shikaris are often indiscriminate, cruel and uncaring.
Shikaris always have ground rules that they follow very carefully. They are honourable people as a rule. But you are right. These days no one follows the rules. They poach in reserved forests, scorn the closed season and kill indiscriminately. But that does not mean the art of shikar is bad. It means that the quality of shikaris is bad. Well, I don't shoot anymore. The game birds and animals are all going extinct these days. But that doesn't mean I am going to give lofty sermons on how bad hunting is.

So what would you recommend, instead?

To take more care of the environment. To initiate an awareness among the leaders of our society- politicians, bureaucrats, thinkers, industrialists- that you cannot destroy your habitat and expect to survive.

Unless we realise this, and unless we change our development priorities, there is no hope. But then I am an optimist. I believe things will change. And for the better.

Is the search for the mountain quail part of this need for creating a new awareness?

It depends on which way you take it

I am in search of a rare bird. That's my immediate goal. But the search itself assumes a larger cause. That is: How to preserve an environment where its wildlife does not have to flee or go underground?

Is this awareness growing?

Yes, I think. More and more people are coming out to support us. As I said before, the Nehrus are great enthusiasts of our cause. Jawaharlal believed in conservation. So did his daughter Indira. She actually launched several very ambitious programmes to encourage the cause of conservation. I would like to believe that her son, Rajiv, shares the same concern.

But does concern at that level help? You cannot impose such a concern on the people from the top.

I agree with you. But when the prime minister shows interest in such a cause, the fall-out is great. People around him cannot take indiscriminate decisions.

But they do?

Then public outcry takes over. As in the case of the Silent Valley.

You speak of just one victory. But what about the countless defeats? So much damage has already taken place. So much has already been lost.

What is gone is gone. We must look at the future and try to make it better than our past. Who am I to offer prescriptions? I am only doing my best. In my own way.

But what precisely is wrong with our attitude? What is it exactly that naturalists like you and defenders of the environment would like to see happen in the land? How can we avoid this onslaught on nature? By giving up all attempts at change?

No no. How can we change or progress? The world must go on. We must keep on progressing to feed our growing population. But that does not mean we should give up everything else in the bargain.

What world can you have without the excitement of natural life? How can you preserve your heritage without caring for it? And, without a heritage, where can man go?

But don't you sometimes find that the genteel art of birdwatching seems so anachronistic in our age, as violence and strife keep on mounting and the pressures on survival marginalise the poetry of our lives? Who cares whether the mountain quail exists or not, when the terrorist strikes or famines kill millions?

These are all parts of the same process of living and dying. You cannot see them in isolation. When you neglect one form of life, you neglect all forms of life. A killer is a killer. Whether he destroys a rare species of bird or he kills a person in cold blood. We must learn to see life as one.

That's a philosophical answer.

It was a philosophical question.

Yes and No. I was only wondering if you do not occasionally feel that your role as an ornithologist is marginal in a society where violence hate and destruction rule with such a firm, sure hand. I am sure every poet, musician, painter faces this dilemma today. What can one do to change the quality of our lives?

Do just what you are capable of. The world will take care of itself.

That's an easy platitude.

Not really, when you believe in it.

When one can't save a single human life with one's best efforts, what good is it trying to track down an elusive mountain quail?

A life is a life. If you can save one life, or one species from extinction, you have done a great job. Celebrate it. Why ask yourself questions.

When one reaches 89, as I have done, you have seen a lot, experienced a lot. You don't give up things so easily.

Not even when the odds are stacked against you?

No, never.

Not even when you feel that you are a voice in the wilderness

No. I love the wilderness.