

# Four places: Notes and reflections

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## Madras<sup>1</sup>

### House Crows *Corvus splendens*

Hearing the caws of House Crows *Corvus splendens* in the middle of the night is not unusual in Besant Nagar. There is a large roost of these birds here, and for reasons unknown they do fly about and call at odd times when it is dark. Thus one gets used to their sounds as a part of the nightscape and loses little sleep when they call. But one does read about unusual behaviour of birds before earthquakes and there have been at least three tremors in the last few years in Madras. The calling of crows at night is somewhat unsettling now.

There lives in Besant Nagar a House Crow that is brown in colour. I first saw him in October 2003. He was flying in the distance then, and his jizz was that of a Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* more than that of a House Crow. This was because he had a very white neck and was everywhere else brown with a tinge of red. He continues to be seen on and off in the area. I even saw him once last month. Over the years his plumage has acquired a somewhat washed out appearance, and he is not quite as striking as he was in the beginning.

The crows here enjoy *kolam*, the patterns of dots and lines traced every morning at the entrance of houses in southern India. They appreciate the *kolam* not as connoisseurs of art but as gourmets! A crow tilting its head and gathering the white powder off the ground is a familiar sight. I used to think this was a peculiar preference of Madras crows, not having seen these birds indulging in this activity anywhere else, but last year I saw a crow consuming *kolam* powder at Rishi Valley (Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh). Maybe this is a common habit. I believe that while a traditional *kolam* is drawn using a paste of rice flour, the commercially sold *kolam* powder (by door-to-door bicycle salesmen) has a mineral ingredient, possibly limestone.

### School drop-outs

My children's school is located in a beautiful campus with many trees. They cannot resist bringing home chicks that appear to have been abandoned by their parents after a premature flight out of their nest—in spite of my advice to leave them alone. We found it relatively easy to send back to the school a huge Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* they brought once, but we could not harden ourselves when the Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica* chick arrived. This tiny bird would perch on a window and make cheeping sounds

to indicate that it was hungry. We wished to feed it on honey, but the ink filler was far too large a device to use as a feeding bottle. So we gave the chick crumbs of bread soaked in honey. We determined the correct size of the crumbs after some experimentation. A feed consisted of just one or two of these crumbs!

Occasionally the sunbird chick would decide that it wished to go to the opposite window and it would set off, its rapidly working wings a blur, progressing across the room like an animated dot. Against all odds, it survived. Eventually we could not stand the worry of rearing it and being responsible for its welfare. We took it back to school to release it after three days. Happily and unbelievably, three sunbirds, presumably the parents and a sibling, were attracted to it by its calls soon after we placed it on the creeper where the nest was built. The entire family moved higher up. There was much excitement among them; what was a little disconcerting was the fact that the father appeared to be pecking the chick when they disappeared from view.

The Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* named Polly alias Pauli was not so easy to return to the 'wild'. We tried releasing her four times in the campus. Each time she had to be brought back because it was evident that she was incapable of sustained flight and possibly of finding her own food. Besides, the crows were quick to see that she was not tuned to the ways of the world and took an unhealthy interest in her. In fact, she was quite traumatised once when a crow tried to catch her. On our last attempt to release her, she actually spent an entire day in the campus before my daughter found her being harassed by crows again. Then Polly a.k.a. Pauli spent many days in our house recovering from these distressing experiences. She exhibited strange food preferences and would eat nothing but grapes in the beginning. Then we discovered that she liked tender leaves. She would nibble at most leaves but was particularly fond of coriander. Her interest in seeds was only mild, which I thought was surprising for a parrot. What she really relished was bananas. One could rightly say that Polly, otherwise known as Pauli, went bananas over bananas. If she saw one of us approaching her with a banana in hand, she would take off from her perch and land on us, getting a firm but painful grip on our person. She went into raptures eating the banana.

Then one day Polly, also known as Pauli, flew out of our house and never returned. She had been a little strange in her behaviour the last two days. She had not been her usual friendly self, snapping at us if we approached her, but we

<sup>1</sup> The author prefers to use the erstwhile 'Madras' for Chennai.

had put this down to her individualistic nature. Little did we suspect that she was plotting her getaway. We all missed her for a long time and hoped that she was faring well wherever she was.

The curious thing about the Rose-ringed Parakeet named Polly (whose assumed name was Pauli) was that her lower mandible was red, not black as would be expected of a member of the southern Indian subspecies, *P. k. manillensis*. Maybe she was born to parents of the northern Indian race *P. k. borealis*. Maybe they too were escapees.

One of the most unexpected bird events here was the flight into our house once of a Red-winged Crested Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus*. This bird flew in suddenly through a balcony, possibly chased by crows. We did not have any time to react. Just as quickly as it had flown in, it flew out and disappeared. We have seen these cuckoos briefly on a couple of other occasions in 'winter' in the neighbourhood. They seem to be regular visitors, leading a discrete life in the neighbourhood.

### Madurai

In May this year, the list of birds I saw from my house in the centre of the city had 13 species—14 including the Jungle Crow, of which I am not sure. Even in the early 1990s, the bird diversity was limited, with the appearance of species such as the Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus* and Grey-headed Myna *Sturnia malabarica* from November to February very welcome to the birdwatcher anchored here.

But I thought I perceived differences in the composition of the bird life of then and the present. Black-headed Mynas *Sturnus pagodarum* used to come regularly to my television antenna then. Red-vented Bulbuls *Pycnonotus cafer* sat on it occasionally. Spotted Owlets *Athene brama* and Barn Owls *Tyto alba* startled us with their calls in the night. All these birds seem to have disappeared. I wonder why. In a built-up area like the middle of Madurai, I suppose the cutting down of even one tree—say one favoured by Coppersmith Barbets *Megalaima haemacephala*—could mean the local 'extinction' of a species. The House Swift *Apus affinis* lives in the Meenakshiamman Temple and possibly in the Tirumalai Naicker Palace. One can imagine that painting and maintenance work undertaken at these locations in the breeding season could be disastrous for them.

I am reminded of an idea called the shifting baseline syndrome. This is a concept introduced in the marine fisheries context. Scientists and managers of each generation treat as the baseline the fish population sizes and the conditions prevailing in marine systems that they observed early in their careers. They proceed to document changes over the next 30 years or so. The next generation of scientists and managers does the same without considering the documentation of the previous generation. As a result, the baseline shifts gradually. What birds were there in Madurai just before I started observing them? A century earlier? In prehistoric times?

If I am asked to name the commonest bird of the Madurai sky now, I have no doubts about my answer: it is the Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, which seems to be doing well. It was not so 10–15 years ago. The House Sparrow *Passer*

*domesticus* was a common species then, but perhaps there was no single species that I could identify as the most abundant. The status of the Blue Rock Pigeon has certainly changed significantly.

In July, least expecting anything out of the ordinary, I looked skyward. A large falcon with a short tail and brick-red plumage was flying across powerfully and purposefully! This was not a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, and so I suppose it was a Shaheen Falcon *F. peregrinus*. The only other time I have seen falcons in the city was more than 15 years ago, when a pair of Laggars *F. jugger* stayed here for a few days.

### Kodaikanal and the Palni Hills

Early this year, I compiled a list of the birds of the Palni Hills (Sathasivam 2006). One would imagine that the bird life of these hills is well documented. Presumably, many birdwatchers have been visiting this region over many years. However, surveying the bird list, one is struck by the gross disproportionateness of the number of records for the various species and by the limited number of records for all of them. Innumerable questions arise in one's mind regarding the distribution and status of most species.

Curious anomalies are seen in the distribution of birds in the Palnis, compared with other areas of the Western Ghats. For example, there are no records of the White-headed Myna *S. blythii* at all, though this is a common species in parts of the Western Ghats such as Periyar Tiger Sanctuary and Topslip. Dr S. Balachandran, of the Bombay Natural History Society, has concluded recently a three-year study of the birds of the Palnis. He discusses in his report these anomalies. Dr Balachandran points out that whereas there are curious absences, a number of endemics are abundant in the Palnis. In a discussion I had with him, he told me that birds such as the Grey-headed Bulbul *P. priocephalus* and the White-bellied Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis pallipes*, endemics that are not common in most places of the Western Ghats, are common in certain parts of the Palnis.

Every 'trip list' received in response to my request for records (from Andrew Robertson, V. Santharam and Aasheesh Pittie) was valuable in this context. I regret that I did not maintain regular notes myself when I lived in Kodaikanal during 1997–1999.

The one record of that period that struck me even then as possibly of significance was the emergence of a Black Bittern *Ixobrychus flavicollis* from reeds at Berijam Lake in February 1998. The *Handbook* (Ali & Ripley 1987) says that this bird 'affects reedy inland swamps and overgrown seepage nullahs in jungle, mostly in the low country, but also suitable marshes up to c. 1200 metres in the hills'. Berijam is located at 2,100m, so this record is notable. Fairbank (1877) found a Black Bittern on two occasions at an unspecified location 'below Vilpati', which is at 1,980m.

Another interesting discovery, which I made in June 1999, was of a Black-and-Orange Flycatcher's *Ficedula nigrorufa* nest. This nest was constructed in a pine tree in Kodaikanal at a little above the height of a human's head. But the tree itself was situated on the edge of a steep embankment, and the nest was positioned facing the embankment side, so that



Black-and-Orange Flycatcher *Ficedula nigrorufa*

the effective height of the nest was considerable. The *Handbook* indicates that this flycatcher usually builds its nest closer to the ground. Nest building by this species in pine trees has not been reported in the literature.

Working on the bird list has made me more alert to potentially important records on subsequent visits to Kodaikanal and the Palnis. In May 2003, I noted a White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* at the water's edge at Kodaikanal Lake. I have never seen or heard this bird in this area or even this altitude previously though I have spent considerable time in the vicinity of the lake.

In January 2005, I visited Kilavarai, which is a village beyond Mannavanur, about 35km from Kodaikanal. There one evening I came upon a large brown owl by the side of a stream. The bird quickly took to the wing and disappeared. I suspect it was a Brown Fish-Owl *Ketupa zeylonensis*, of which there are no recent records (after the 1950s) from the higher elevations of the Palnis.

The next morning I heard a curious flow of calls and traced them to a Rufous-backed Shrike *Lanius schach*. This shrike had Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* and Black-and-Orange Flycatcher imitations in its repertoire.

This year in May I was delighted to see at least a pair of Dabchicks *Tachybaptus ruficollis* at Kodaikanal Lake. This species was noted by Fairbank (1877) and Terry (1887) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as living in the lake and nesting there; but subsequent birdwatchers do not mention it though they have reported it from other high-elevation water bodies, at Berijam and Mannavanur, since the 1980s. Recently, Stewart and Balcar (2002) recorded it from 'Kodaikanal reservoir' [as

distinct from 'Kodaikanal lake', the location provided by them for the Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* in their list]. I hope that the Dabchick has returned 'for ever'. The birds I saw were in breeding plumage, which is perhaps reason for cheer. There is a wire fence in good repair all around the lake now, designed to keep humans and other animals on the road away from the water no doubt, which must be affording protection to the grebes.

It was at the lake again that I found a kingfisher sitting in a boathouse. It was very tolerant of my approach. I could observe its features clearly even without binoculars. It was a Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* in all respects except for one curious aspect: its lower mandible was orange—was this the 'gape and base of lower mandible pale salmon reddish in female and immature male' referred to by the *Handbook*?

### Gujarat

I was in Gandhinagar in June for a symposium. I had no time to go on a birdwatching trip though I would have greatly enjoyed doing so. Nevertheless, the birds are quite difficult to avoid here! They seem to be abundant, and it was a pleasure to observe the legendary lack of fear of man of the birds of Gujarat. Even without trying, I saw or heard close to 40 species in three days.

One knows one is in a 'different land' when the babbler in the garden is a Large Grey Babbler *Turdoides malcolmi* or a Jungle Babbler *T. striata* and not the White-headed Babbler *T. affinis* one is used to. Similarly, the dove you hear is the Little Brown Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* and not the Spotted Dove *S. chinensis*.

A pair of smoky brown swallows was commencing the construction of a nest in the TRC Hostel. Little pieces of mud had fallen on the freshly swept floor below. The birds were whitish below, and a pair of white spots was clearly visible in their tail when they spread it as they turned in flight. It is intriguing to think that these were Crag Martins because it was the 'wrong season' for them here. Crag Martins are known to nest in the Himalaya.

I wrote to Mr Lavkumar Khachar about the martins. He suggested that they were Dusky Crag Martins *Hirundo concolor*. I have seen Dusky Crag Martins in southern India. In the Palnis and at Munnar, they are much darker than the birds I saw in Gujarat. I hope that someone can verify what species was nesting at the TRC Hostel in Gandhinagar.

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