

Vembanad water bird counts: 2001–2006 and beyond

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Every year now, since 2001, I have regularly received copies of reports of water bird counts from Vembanad, brought out as a booklet by the Department of Forests & Wildlife, Government of Kerala and the Kottayam Nature Society, Kottayam. It is edited by Dr B. Sreekumar, who also co-ordinates this annual event.

Vembanad, for those who are not familiar, is a Ramsar site (declared in 2002) and an Important Bird Area (IBA) in central Kerala. It is the largest lagoon / backwater in the state and is some 79,400 ha in extent. Together with the adjoining network of rivers, marshes and paddy fields, it represents a unique tapestry of wetlands that include mangrove vegetation and a herony.

The first survey (count) of the Vembanad wetlands was conducted in 1993 and I was one among the participants. I still have vivid memories of that visit. The early morning scene at Kaipuzha Muttu—the mist lifting slowly over the lush green paddy fields as the sun rose over the coconut palms, the placid waters of the Kaipuzha River with its wooden bridge and country canoes that made a picture postcard come alive, the large roost of cormorants (*Phalacrocoracidae*) (mostly Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*) and Black-crowned Night-Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax*—these memories will be cherished forever.

The counts are held annually in January, following the same strategy used in 1993—dividing the entire area into ten sectors, each surveyed by a group of volunteers led by a seasoned birdwatcher. The counts cover representative habitats ranging from the open lake (lagoon), paddy fields, marshy areas, roost sites and nesting sites. All groups travel by foot, except those who survey the lake, and they use motorboats.

Each report presents area-wise and species-wise trends in bird populations in the form of tables and graphs, an introduction to the methodology used, a brief description of the various sites, a checklist of birds recorded, a list of participants, besides occasional site-specific articles on fishes, flora, etc., by experts. The present checklist of birds (pp. 40–44; Sreekumar 2006), which follows the nomenclature of Manakadan & Pittie (2001), stands at 193 species. Malayalam names are also provided. Perhaps the next report could include status and abundance, besides highlighting important species.

Though the checklist is growing, the trends in the water bird population are not encouraging. From a total of 36,498 birds counted in 1993 (Anon, 1993), the current years' figure represents an all-time low of 11,492 birds. This is somewhat surprising given the added protection and high awareness created by the print media on the importance of the wetland.

Several groups of birds show declining or fluctuating trends at this wetland and this demands a closer study. For instance, the total ducks (*Anatidae*) counted fluctuate from 25,241 (Anonymous 1993), 3,878 (Sreekumar 2002) to 19,234 (Sreekumar 2005). Herons (*Ardeidae*) have declined from

6,129 (Anonymous 1993) to 1,380 (Sreekumar 2006). Indian Shag from 2,240 (Anonymous 1993) to 274 (Sreekumar 2006), the lowest being 128 (Sreekumar 2005). Great Cormorants *P. carbo* have made an appearance more recently but numbers have not yet stabilised. Little Cormorants *P. niger* also varies in numbers: 4,562 (Anonymous 1993), 6,058 (Sreekumar 2001) and 589 (Sreekumar 2006).

Currently some of the identified threats to the wetland include reclamation for agriculture and plantations, pollution from industries, agro-chemicals and sewage, over-extraction of lime shell, increased tourism and 'bunding' of rivers that affect movements of fish and other fauna. Perhaps an intensive round-the-year study could help in identifying precise reasons for these population trends.

A remarkable feature of this count is its popularity among birdwatchers, mostly from different parts of Kerala and also some from adjacent states. The list of participants—ranging from 52 to 119 (apart from 15–18 forest department officials—is quite likely to exceed the species counted for the site! Incidentally Kerala takes the lead in organising bird surveys (as well as mammal censuses) and is a pioneer in having a long-standing partnership with a very supportive and enlightened forest department. In 1990, I took part in the first such survey organised at the Silent Valley National Park. This is a fruitful relationship as the benefits are mutual: the forest department can boast of having up-to-date information on the status of wildlife habitats as well as inventories of its fauna and the participants get a unique opportunity to visit areas not normally accessible as tourists and are able to pursue their interests. This is something other states too could emulate.

In the latest report, there is a reference to a conservation model that has been proposed by the forest department keeping in mind the ecological and economic values of the wetland for the large population of people that depend on the water body. The proposed conservation reserve also takes into account the livelihood security of these people. This proposal has been endorsed by six panchayats. One hopes this would eventually result in a win-win situation for both the wildlife as well as people.

References

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