

# Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia fuciphaga*: extinction by protection

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## Prologue

This piece was written sometime in 2004, and included detailed inputs from discussions the author had with Dr Ravi Sankaran. Tragically, Dr Sankaran passed away in January 2009, after suffering a massive heart attack.

It was reported on 18 August 2009 that Dr Sankaran's efforts to de-list the Edible-nest Swiftlet had finally been de-listed, raising hopes that the project he had initiated for the conservation of the birds in the Islands would have a fair chance of being implemented. ['Selling bird's nest soup to save this bird: there's a change in law.' Tuesday, Aug 18, 2009 at 0354 hrs New Delhi: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/selling-birds-nest-soup-to-save-this-bird-theres-a-change-in-law/503342/0>.]

## Introduction

The path to hell, for humans, it is said, is paved with good intentions. For a little bird in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, the Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia fuciphaga*, the path to extinction, it would seem, too has been paved with similar good intentions. Being listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA), is the ultimate recognition of the endangered status of any creature in India

## A nest of saliva

It also means that the highest degree of protection will be accorded to the species, and this is exactly what has happened in the case of the Edible-nest Swiftlet too. Herein lies the ultimate paradox, and probably the seeds of an unfolding tragedy. At the crux of the matter is the nest of the bird that is made entirely of its own saliva. The final product is a beautiful white 'half-cup', roughly

six centimeters across with an average weight of 10 gm.

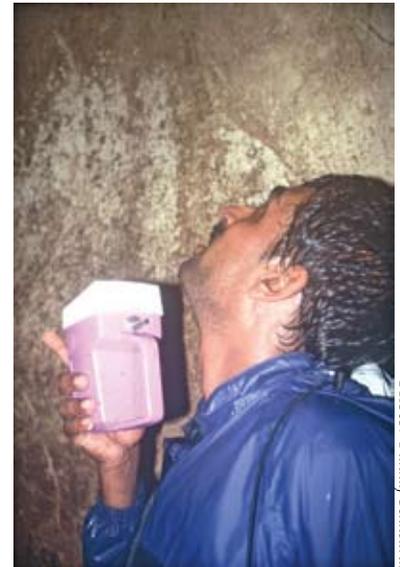
This is indeed a fascinating biological quirk, but one for which the bird has had to pay a heavy price. Since the 16th century, when the nest of the bird is reported to have become an important part of Chinese cuisine and pharmacy, its been heavily exploited across its range. While there is little modern scientific evaluation or validation of the efficacy or efficiency of the nest, consumption has been immense. A TRAFFIC International publication of 1994 estimated that about nine

million nests, weighing nearly 76 tons, were being imported into China annually. Not surprisingly then, the wholly edible white nest was and continues to be one of the world's most expensive animal products, pegged sometime back at US \$ 2,620-4,060 per kg in retail markets in the South-east Asian countries.

It is well known that a part of the international trade was being fed by the extraction of nests that takes place from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, but authentic information only started coming in 1995, when the first studies were initiated by ornithologist, Dr. Ravi Sankaran, of the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON). He initiated a laborious and painstaking process of locating the nesting sites and enumerating the nests and birds. Detailed surveys were conducted on the islands between March 1995 and early 1997, where he visited a total of 385 caves (325 in the Andamans). The outcome was two pioneering reports. The first published in 1995 dealt with the Nicobars and the second, in 1998, presented a complete picture of the situation in the entire archipelago.

## A threatened population

Sankaran's studies estimated that the total breeding population on the islands was about 6,700 breeding pairs. He reported that at least 94% of the caves were being exploited for the bird's nest, and that less than 1% of the breeding population was being allowed to successfully fledge as the nests were being harvested for the market



Ravi inside a cave during the monsoon.

Photo: Pankaj Sekhsaria



Edible-nest Swiftlet's saliva nest.

Photo: Pankaj Sekhsaria

before the nesting could be completed. Sankaran estimated that the Edible-nest Swiftlet had experienced a whopping 80% decline in its population, placing it in the critically threatened category (IUCN criteria A1c). This was primarily due to indiscriminate and unrestricted nest collection from the wild, leading him to the further conclusion that if this was not dealt with urgently the bird would soon be extinct in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

He initially advocated strict protection, but changed his stand when he realised that protection, in the conventional sense, would not work. He also learnt of the ingenious house ranching methods developed by the Indonesians for managing swiftlets.

### House ranching

It was estimated that nearly 65,000 kg of nests were being produced in Indonesia annually, from colonies of the Edible-nest Swiftlet that reside within human habitation: a total of 5.5 million birds and their nests, in houses and rooms of human habitations, optimally managed by humans. "Thus, while swiftlet populations in caves will continue to decline, or become extinct, due to collection pressures," Sankaran concluded, "the species will survive because there are hundreds of thousands of birds that reside within human habitation, all optimally managed".

Nest collectors, he started to advocate, would have to be empowered to harvest nests within the rigid framework of strictly scientifically harvesting regimes. This would have to be complimented in the 'Indonesian way', with a realistic long-term strategy that would include both in-situ and ex-situ conservation programmes, i.e., house ranching, both based on the economic importance of the species and using this importance to organise local communities to conserve the species.

In 1999, his recommendation took the form of an innovative initiative that was launched jointly by the Wildlife Circle of the Department of Environment and Forests, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and SACON. The final aim of the initiative was to ensure protection of the nests in the wild so that eggs would be available for the house ranching ex situ component. The project took off well. Protection accorded to a complex of 28 caves on Challis

Ek in North Andaman Island, and one cave on Interview Island Wildlife Sanctuary, saw over 3,000 chicks being fledged, a growth of over 25% in the population of the swiftlets at these sites. A team of local people, who were earlier nest collectors, were now being motivated towards protection, and subsequently, sustainable harvesting.

### The law becomes the hurdle

Just as phase one was taking off, the law came into the picture, and in October 2003 the Edible-nest Swiftlet was put onto Schedule I of the Wildlife Act. This meant that there could be no activity that involved use of, or trade in the nest of the bird—the primary premise on which Sankaran's initiative had been based. The entire project was dealt a set back and in spite of continued efforts, over the years, to have the swiftlet removed from Schedule I, it continues to be listed there.

Admittedly there are genuine concerns about the de-listing of a species and the implications of an act of this kind. The biggest fear is of setting a precedent that could be misused by vested interests. In this case however, the recommendations are based on solid, detailed, and pioneering scientific studies of nearly a decade, and were in turn backed with a wealth of international information and experience. "Its more like apiculture," would be Sankaran's argument, "where bees are reared for their honey. House ranching of swiftlets cannot be likened to the farming of animals for skin or meat". The implication of not delisting the bird is that the conservation initiative is bound to fail, while harvesting from the wild would continue unabated. The consequences of this would be the local extinction of the bird in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands—a predicament that was summed up with stunning simplicity by J. C. Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society. Speaking during the concluding session of the International Seminar to commemorate the centenary Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society in Mumbai in November 2003, he spoke of the fate of the Edible-nest Swiftlet if corrective action was not taken at the earliest: extinction by protection—the ultimate oxymoron.



Ravi with his field staff and wife Deepa at the Edible-nest Swiftlet Camp, Challis Ek, North Andaman Island. (Challis Ek translates as '41'—which is the number of caves in this cave complex where the swiftlets are found). At extreme left is Alex, Ravi's man Friday. They worked together for a very long time and, like was Ravi's way of working, they also became close family friends.

Photo: Pantkaj Sekhsaria