

presumably to make another nest. Incidentally, this was April, and the *Book of Indian birds* describes the nesting season as June-September. Is the *Book*, a little inaccurate, I wonder? (After all, there is nothing to prevent one from behaving like the boatman at Ranganthitoo, who is supposed to have snubbed Dr Salim Ali for his lack of knowledge of birds.)

With the jacanas too, both species were present in strength. The iridescent Bronzewing made ungainly landings on the lily-pads, their long legs stuck out behind them; the Pheasant-tailed, as always, picked their way over the pads as delicately as dancers. There were one or two magnificent male specimens of the latter in full plumage. At another site I have noticed these jacanas turning lotus leaves upside-down with their beaks, to examine? scratch? eat from? the underside. I did not see this happen here, but another member of the party did. Another revelation about this species was to see, on a thickly grassed part of the lake, a virtual colony of juveniles, perhaps twenty altogether, in a small area.

There were other good things on the grassy edge. White-breasted Waterhens darted distractedly about. What seemed to be a crane was startled out of a clump of

reeds by our approach, leaving us with an impression of earth-brown barred with black. Two egrets, one Large and one Median, stood silently back-to-back. We spotted a Chestnut Bittern among another clump of reeds, well hidden in spite of its bright chestnut colouring, enormous yellow bill and beady yellow eye. I think that this is now, for reasons unknown, also called Cinnamon Bittern. Rather carried away by the bittern theme, I was prepared to discover another bittern on the far bank, but this turned out to be an Indian Pond-Heron in breeding plumage. This plumage – red-brown back and elegant crest-feathers – makes it startlingly different from the dull bird for which we normally have so little time. A sandpiper, beautifully spotted, with yellow legs and a white eye-stripe, allowed us to have a pleasant little argument about whether it was the Wood or the Spotted. I now find that the two are the same.

Finally, the wildfowl, which were largely in the center, and the back of the lake. I was glad to see plenty of the fat comforting Common Coots, which always provide a lake with an air of all's-well-with-the-world. Little Grebes do the same, but here we saw only one or two, and that after some hard looking. In the process, though, we discovered a

Darter. I suspect there were some Lesser Whistling-Ducks in the distance, their small pinky-brown fronts distinctive, as I remember from the days of the Kihim pond. But the crowning glories of this group were the Garganey. There were one or two drakes, unmistakable with their handsome chocolate-striped heads. They were accompanied by many ducks that had an indeterminate buff colouring and black spots. We were in hopes that these might turn out to be Common Teal and provide one more species for our list – but finally it was clear that they were female Garganey, partly because of their largish size, and partly because they obediently followed the actions of the male, as happens with other creatures on this planet. The chief of these actions consisted of 'up-ending', that diverting performance which I have never before been able to observe so well. With a rude suddenness, as if interrupting a conversation, a duck disappears vertically into the water and remains so, its tail defying the sky. Let us borrow from this creature a little of its cheerful intrepidity, enough to hope that its homeland will remain untouched and unharmed.

## The day of the Indian Pitta

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I was in the car park, some hundred yards from the entrance to Berwala Sanctuary and the first bird I heard loud and clear was the Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*. I was enjoying the lingering resonance of that call in my mind yet, when a startled Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* flew up in the air with laboured wing-beats and hysterical cackling until out of breath. As he leveled in a powerful glide and passed overhead, he looked unbelievably invincible. Now that was an exciting start (06:00hrs on 6.v.2004) to a two-hour morning walk.

The Berwala Bird Sanctuary (30°41'N, 76°41'E; 300m a.s.l.) is about 15km from Chandigarh in the Morni Hills. It was created in April 2003. At 250ha it may well be the smallest of all in the country. Along its longest axis it is less than 4km and at the widest a mere kilometer. But within this compact space there is an amazing abundance of birds, mammals, butterflies and flora: taking the level trail through the

bed of a seasonal stream could result in four hours of uninterrupted wildlife sightings. During winter, you could spend the better part of a day walking over game-trails, which mostly follow the crests of ridges. Because Berwala is at the junction of the Shivaliks with the plains, it is a busy transition zone for the annual to-and-fro altitudinal movement of wildlife, synchronous with the seasons of the year.

I am lucky to be mostly accompanied by Sada Ram, a wildlife Inspector, whose store of jungle-lore is enviable. When we came by several cow-dung pats, freshly scattered by birds to pick food from, Sada Ram, taking one glance at the disturbed dung, pointed towards the thicket the birds were sheltering in. And sure enough we put up a few Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*. For the first time, I saw two moulting cockerels. There was none of the splendour of colourful feathers or the strutting bearing associated with the male of the species.

Instead, they were two gawky birds in overall dark grey stubble. Mr J. C. Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society, who told me of this litmus test for the genetically pure breed of the Red Junglefowl, would be glad to read of this encounter. And of course, I imparted some knowledge to Sada Ram!

On being persistently directed, I did pick up the notes of a faint birdcall, entirely new to me. We scanned but there were no birds to be seen. Sada Ram was sure that there were at least two Crimson Sunbirds *Aethopyga siparaja*. Shortly, we saw one on a eucalyptus branch. Last year too, I had seen them hereabouts and so I assume that they perhaps breed at Berwala. Otherwise these birds ought not to be here at their peak nesting time. As we watched, calls of Indian Pittas filled the background. May be, they too breed here. Looking at another eucalyptus cluster, there was a family of Indian Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, two adults and three juveniles, the size of

babblers. Even though the chicks of birds be grown up enough, they remain conditioned to beg food, should parents be in sight!

Prominent features of the topography of the Shivaliks are the vertical mud cliffs, mostly bare and smooth. There is one in the middle of the sanctuary which last year had some 180 active nests of Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*. I would like to know from ornithologists why there was not a single active nest this year? As we stared at the desolate cliff face, we were cheered to see several Crested Buntings *Melophus lathami*. They were attracted to the trickle of water oozing from the base of the cliff. And there was one female of the species whose mellow colours, the tidy crest and slender body gave her a delicate presence. I can bet my last Rupee that the male Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea* we saw next was my fourth sighting on that same bush in the last two years!

On the skyline of the mud cliffs, we saw four Gorals *Naemorhedus goral* [the locals conveniently call them “*Van bakri*” (= Forest goats)]. We should have seen many more. But then we had also encountered two packs of 6-10 village dogs that have become predators. A wildlife guard, attempting to rescue a cornered young Sambar *Cervus unicolor* the previous evening, was chased away by the emboldened pack. I am told that such packs are also playing havoc with

birds’ nests on the ground and on bushes. What good is the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, if it can neither deter organised poaching of wildlife nor be implicit to permit pragmatic management of sanctuaries where predators are altering the prey-base drastically?

While we watched one Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia* and one Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, there were more pittas calling from close quarters. A Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* flew down and perched a few paces away. He carried no evidence of the “diagnostic” white rictal spot. Sometimes I begin to doubt its authenticity. In my experience (which is strictly of an undisciplined amateur) you come by this spot once on every 20 to 30 birds seen at random. There were two persistent bird calls, which with the aid of Kazmierczak’s book (maps and syllabised calls), we thought belonged to Hodgson’s Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* (?) and the Indian Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*. Of the latter’s identity there was just no doubt.

The sanctuary’s wildlife guards use the most innovative methods to create water storage for birds and animals during these bone-dry days of May-June. At one spot, a hole had been excavated at the base of a clay mound. It was full to the brim. Here was the biggest spoor of Sambar I had ever seen. And in stark contrast, one tiny foot print of

a Porcupine *Hystrix* sp., along with the drag-mark of her quills. We were lucky to locate the pugmark of a Leopard *Panthera pardus* that a local had directed us towards.

Near the car park there were three Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, all in the chocolate-brown plumage of the juvenile. One Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* flew overhead with his monumental slow wing beats. We spotted a Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* hammering away at the trunk of an ‘*Amaltas*’ in bloom. Amidst the thick foliage of a Jamun, a female Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea* sat so concealed that for a long time she had us guessing. I was truly sorry that so many White-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon smyrnensis* were all sitting out-of-job in this parched landscape. Next we were drawn to considerable bird activity as we neared another small puddle of water. There were at least twenty Yellow-throated Sparrows *Petronia xanthocollis*. This was my first sighting of this species here. At long last, we saw the Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata* looking all the more plump because of a cloud of White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* in his close proximity.

And then, one pitta flew across, the two white moons on his wings in full display. Time to go back home, refreshed in body and soul.

## Birding in Finland

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Amongst many other things, Finns are great at two pastimes: drinking coffee, and birdwatching. It is said that Finland has the highest density of birdwatchers in the world. I can well believe it, having spent two weeks travelling with my wife from the southern to the northern tip of the country this summer.

Our host, Mikko Pyhala, an ambassador, birding freak, avid traveller, and keen environmentalist all in one, drove us from Helsinki in the south to Utsjoki in the north, and then into the Norwegian countryside up to the Arctic Ocean. On the way we visited a host of protected areas, including Linnansaari, Siikalahti, Koli, Kevo, Oulanka, and Urho Kekkonen. Birding was of course special at these sites, but it was quite lively even outside, not least because

of the way in which café owners’ and shopkeepers’ eyes would light up when they heard of our interest in birds. In the protected areas, there were beautifully designed interpretation facilities to guide us, but at the road-side cafes and shops, the informal tips we got on nearby spots where rare birds could be seen, were no less helpful. It was truly an amazing experience to be in a country where literally everyone seemed to be in love with birds, or at least with birdwatchers!

We saw a total of 107 species in those two weeks, counting the brief stint in Norway (see list below). We covered forested habitats (rather uniform, dominated through the country by species of pine, birch, and spruce), lakes (Finland has 1,88,000 of them, mostly quite shallow),

marshes and bogs (a considerable part of Finland is low-lying, hence perennially wet), gently rolling hills with stunted tree growth and grassy stretches, and the coast along the Arctic Ocean. The last also included one spectacular bird colony, with tens of thousands of seabirds like gannets, various gull species, puffins, and the like.

At Kuusamo, we were in for a special treat. We met up with Hannu Hautala, the country’s best-known nature photographer. Big and burly, with a bushy beard and kindly eyes, Hannu reminded us of the naturalists of the past, completely engrossed in their passion. He and his wife Irma took us birding to a forest patch near their house, in search of the Hawk Owl...and sure enough after an hour of trying, it was spotted. One image that will remain forever etched in my mind: