

Birds seen on a short trip to Peechi, Kerala, India

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Along with ten students and a colleague from Rishi Valley School, I spent three days (2-4.i.2004) in Peechi at the Kerala Forest Research Institute and we took off into the forest area (actually the overgrown "Botanical Garden") when we were free. Returning to Peechi after a gap of over ten years was almost like homecoming for me. Having spent two years here between 1991 and 1993 studying the ecology of woodpeckers, I had been fascinated by the rich bird life of this forest, generally considered degraded, and poor in large mammals. I was apprehensive at the kind of changes that could have taken place over the intervening years (there had been rumours that the Zoological Gardens were shifted here from Thrissur town) and had anticipated the worst.

What a pleasant surprise it was to see the "Botanical garden" area that is just adjacent to the Dam, a major tourist attraction, still in excellent condition! In fact I felt the place had become more overgrown and wild since my last visit and this was borne out by the subtle changes in the still rich bird life. Tall, moist deciduous trees towered up to 25m or so and there was impenetrable undergrowth in some areas. It appears that there is also a considerable reduction in the movement of people and vehicles over the years. The plantation areas of *Eucalyptus* sp., showed signs of regeneration of native vegetation.

The vegetation was still lush and the trees had not yet shed their leaves although it was the beginning of the dry season. The Silk Cotton *Bombax ceiba* trees were in bloom while *Melia dubia* and *Sterculia guttata* were in fruit. The weather was pleasant with clear skies, cool nights and warm days.

In the seven and a half hours (two mornings and one late afternoon) spent out in the forest area and the reservoir, we recorded 103 species of birds. This is a sizeable figure as I had recorded a total of 219 species in the Sanctuary during my stay here (Santharam, *in press*).

Of the eight woodpecker species I had studied here, I now recorded only six Brown-capped Pygmy *Dendrocopos nanus*, Rufous *Celeus brachyurus*, Small Yellow-naped *Picus chlorolophus*, Little Scaly-bellied Green *Picus xanthopygaeus*, Lesser Golden-backed *Dinopium benghalense* and Greater

Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*. Only three of them (first and the last two) were common as in those days and three others were only heard once or twice. The Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*, a favourite of mine, which used to nest in the area, was missing, as was the Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis*. Both barbets, White-cheeked *Megalaima viridis* and Coppersmith *M. haemacephala*, were both common.

15-20 Green Imperial-Pigeons *Ducula aenea* were noticed sunning atop trees and flew when we approached too close. Yellow-legged Green-Pigeons *Treron phoenicoptera* were also regularly seen, as was the Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, often noticed in its dashing low flight across the paths.

A male Malabar Trogon *Harpactes fasciatus* was spotted, quietly perched on a tree, and was the star attraction. We followed it as it flew to another tree. I do not remember seeing the bird here earlier, though it was recorded from other sites in the sanctuary fairly often. Another bird that captivated the students' attention (even the least interested ones yearned to catch a glimpse of it) was the Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella*. There were at least two pairs moving about rather rapidly amongst the dense foliage and there was a scramble for binoculars. Although everyone got a good look, they were willing to spend more time, well past the breakfast, to watch it longer.

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus* was another attractive bird that was often sighted with the mixed flocks of foraging forest birds. Just as the birds followed the drongo (or was it the other way around?) we followed the drongo and got to see other birds that included the Bronzed *D. aeneus* and Grey Drongos *D. leucophaeus*, Small *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus* and Scarlet Minivets *P. flammeus*, the occasional Large *Coracina macei* and Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrikes *C. melanoptera*, Large *Tephrodornis gularis* and Common Woodshrikes *T. pondicerianus* and Great Tits *Parus major*, apart from woodpeckers. I missed the Velvet-fronted Nuthatches *Sitta frontalis* – perhaps they were overlooked in the crowd!

Three species of orioles – the Eurasian Golden *Oriolus oriolus*, Black-headed *O.*

xanthornus and the rare, migratory Black-naped *O. chinensis* were all there. Two Spangled Drongos *Dicrurus hottentottus* were seen at a *Bombax* tree. I was eager to renew my contacts with the Black-crested (Ruby-throated) Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus* that was, ten years ago, the commonest bulbul in the area and was, after some efforts, able to locate a pair in the *Eucalyptus* plantation. This was hardly surprising, as there were several endemic Grey-headed Bubluls *P. priocephalus*, a species that was rarely seen earlier. Ali [*Birds of Kerala*, Oxford University Press, 1983 (reprint)] notes that while both these species occur in similar habitats, the latter prefers more humid areas with denser (forest) growth. How true! In the last ten years the vegetation has grown much denser, especially the undergrowth, to the extent that I could not locate some of the paths I used to take during my fieldwork. I do hope other parts of the sanctuary too are getting back the vegetation. Another bird that appears to have established itself here is the Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*. It was not too common earlier.

Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea*, Asian Paradise *Terpsiphona paradisi*, Asian Brown *Muscicapa dauurica*, a lone Brown-breasted *M. muttui*, Verditer *Eumyias thalassina* and Tickell's Blue *Cyornis tickelliae* represented flycatchers. The thrush family too was well represented with Malabar Whistling-thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*, which enthralled briefly with its school-boy whistles (that our boys tried mimicking rather unsuccessfully!), the White-throated subspecies of the Orange-headed Ground Thrush *Zoothera citrina*, Black-capped subspecies of the Eurasian Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* and White-rumped Shama *C. malabaricus*. I was glad to see the Shama, as there had been only one pair here ten years ago.

Indian Hanging-Parrots *Loriculus vernalis* were as common as earlier, as were the Plum-headed Parakeets *Psittacula cyanocephala*. Banded Bay Cuckoos' *Cacomantis sonneratii* calls were frequently heard. A Stork-billed Kingfisher *Halcyon capensis* seen next to a White-breasted *H. smyrnensis* cousin provided good comparison for the novice birdwatchers.

Crested Tree-Swifts *Hemiprocne coronata* were commonly seen in the *Eucalyptus* plantation where I had known them to roost and nest. Only once did I hear the calls of the Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* and the Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea*. Both the Jungle *Turdoides striatus* and White-headed Babblers *T. affinis* were seen, the latter in more open areas. The Spotted Babbler's *Pellorneum ruficeps* melodious calls were heard once. Thick-billed *Dicaeum agile*, Tickell's *D. erythrorhynchos* and perhaps the Plain Flowerpeckers *D. concolor*, Purple *Nectarinia asiatica*, Purple-rumped *N. zeylonica* and Loten's Sunbirds *N. lotenia* were noticed often.

Grey-headed Starlings *Sturnus malabaricus* were seen in good numbers on the *Bombax* trees. These birds were also noticed in flight one evening towards dusk in Thrissur, right in the busiest localities in the centre of the town. I remember seeing several Rosy Starlings *S. roseus* here in the dry season when the *Bombax ceiba* trees in the vicinity of the temple were in bloom.

Raptors present include the Changeable Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatus* - which in this case did not change its old haunts and was perhaps nesting on the same *Terminalia paniculata* tree, Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Crested

Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela*, Shikra *Accipiter badius* and Black Kite *Milvus migrans*. The birds seen in the vicinity of the reservoir from the dam include Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, River Tern *Sterna aurantia*, Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis* - (2-3 birds), Little Egretta *garzetta* and Cattle egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, Indian Pond-*Ardeola grayii* and Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax*. Two Franklin's Nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis* were heard at dusk across the dam along the scrub-covered slope. Several Indian Edible-nest Swiftlets *Collocalia unicolor*, House *Apus affinis* and Asian Palm-Swifts *Cypsiurus balasiensis*, Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* and Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* were seen in flight, hawking insects.

It was wonderful to be back at Peechi and it was interesting to notice the subtle but significant changes in the bird life following the changes in the vegetation. We need to monitor such changes over long time periods to see how the wildlife responds to changes in the vegetation. Peechi appears ideal given its easy access and rich and diverse bird life. Perhaps Nameer or someone else from nearby areas would take the initiative to re-survey the birds of this sanctuary.

Other species seen on the visit: Common Hoopoe *Upupa epos*, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*, Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*, Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*, Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*, Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*, Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*, Gold-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*, House *Corvus splendens* and Jungle crows *C. macrorhynchos*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, Red-whiskered *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Red-vented *P. cafer* and White-browed Bulbuls *P. luteolus*, Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, Blyth's Reed- *Acrocephalus dumetorum* and Greenish Leaf-Warblers *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, Yellow-throated Sparrow *Petronia xanthocollis*, White-rumped Munia *Lonchura striata* and Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*.

Reference

Santharam, V. (In press). Birds of the Peechi-Vazhani Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala (India) *Blackbuck*.

New and significant records from the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh, India

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The Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP; Himachal Pradesh, India), represents the best example of undisturbed west Himalayan temperate forest and falls within one of the globally Endemic Bird Areas (DO2: Western Himalayas) identified by the ICBP Biodiversity Project (Gaston et al. 1994). But the birds of GHNP have not been exhaustively surveyed. Both Babault (1920) and Whistler (1926) visited Parbati Valley, a day's walk from the park boundary and Wynter-Blyth (1952) passed through Tirthan Valley, not far from the park. There is no published account reporting birds from the actual park area, except by Gaston et al. (1994). The purpose of this note is to update published information on the avifauna of the park with additional records from birdwatching trips to the Tirthan Valley during 16-20.vi.2002 and 13-24.iv.2003.

New records

1. Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*: Four birds were observed on 13.iv.2003 near

Sai Ropa (c.1440m). Later five birds were seen outside the park in the afternoon on 24.iv.2003 at the Rohtang Pass (3,978m). Both the groups were migrating northwards.

2. Shikra *Accipiter badius*: A male was observed calling in the afternoon on 23.iv.2003 and again in the morning on 24.iv.2003 at Sai Ropa. It is possible that the species moves to the higher areas during summer.

3. Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*: A small flock of five birds was observed near Sai Ropa at c1600m on 18.vi.2002, considerably higher than the known altitudinal range of 600m for the species (Kazmierczak 2000).

4. House Swift *Apus affinis*: More than 200 were seen in the afternoon near Sai Ropa on 24.iv.2003. For fifteen minutes or so they hunted in the valley before flying away.

Significant records

1. Western Tragopan *Tragopan melanocephalus*: This 'Vulnerable'

pheasant was heard late in the evening of 15.iv.2003 at 17:50hrs while camping at Shilt (c.3100m). The wailing call was heard nine times. On 16.iv.2003, early in the morning, it started calling at 05:30hrs and continued up to 07:00hrs with an odd-call at 09:00hrs also. While walking on the slippery track from Shilt to Chhoa Dar, one was flushed near the camp. Unlike Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha* and Impeyan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* it did not call when flushed. However, its wings made a curious, rattling sound, very different from the other pheasants. Around 07:55hrs one male flew down the slope and landed on the track barely 5m from us! For five seconds we were treated to an eye-filling view of his spiky black crest, scarlet face and nape and flame-red breast. Seeing us so close the startled bird walked 2m or so up the slope before turning and wheeling down the steep mountainside, twisting between the trees. Another male flew behind that one, but kept