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Nest structure variation in Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* in Kutch, Gujarat

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(With one photograph online at: www.indianbirds.in)

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* is seen throughout the desert district of Kutch (Gujarat, India). Here its nesting season is from June to September, when broad-leaved monsoon plants appear. The usual nest type i.e., a pouch formed by stitching together two leaves, was observed in Bhuj (Gujarat) by S.N. Varu (*verbally*). Ali (1945) suspected that in Kutch, owing to scarcity of large-leaved plants, Common Tailorbirds might be forced to construct a

different type of nest, perhaps a purse of woven fibres, as the Prinias (*Prinia* spp.) generally do. He added, "I leave this point to other observers to verify".

On 2.vii.2005 we came across a nest of a Common Tailorbird in Mr Dilip Khatau's farmhouse, on the way to Nani Aral in Kutch. The nest was a cup of soft material, slung from a small shelter of dry and dead date-palm leaves, 1.2 m above the ground. The use of plant leaves, stitched together to

form a pouch, was not present. Neither was green grass, used by Rufous-fronted Prinia *Prinia buchanani* and Grey-breasted Prinia *P. hodgsonii* in the construction of their nests, present. The nest contained three bluish-white eggs, which a Common Tailorbird was incubating.

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Nesting of Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* in a building

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This note reports an instance of Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*, which is primarily a tree hole nesting species, nesting in a hole in the wall of a double-storey building in Pune city, Maharashtra state.

The residential area of Kothrud, in the western part of Pune, has a lot of tree cover, primarily road-side, fruit and ornamental trees and plants in the gardens and parks that attract a wide variety of birds. Small flocks of Plum-headed Parakeet are regularly heard, identified by their distinctive "tooi?" calls, as they fly through our neighbourhood. They are often seen feeding in the gardens. The area is also home to the Rose-ringed Parakeet *P. krameri* and Alexandrine Parakeet *P. eupatria*.

Along a busy lane that serves as an access to my housing colony, between September and April 2005, I regularly observed a small flock of Plum-headed Parakeet flying around a two-storey stone-walled house that adjoins the road. The birds were seen landing on the trees around the house and often descending into a custard apple tree *Annona* sp., to eat the

fruit.

From 21.ii.2005 onwards, I observed that a pair was regularly perching around a horizontal crack in the vertical wall of the building just below the flat concrete roof (see photo). The crack was over 30 cm in length and about 5 cm at its widest. One or both birds would descend from the roof and land on the crack or land on the roof and then fly down and perch at the edge of the crack. Both sexes were observed disappearing into the crack and remaining in the hole for the duration of my observations, which lasted 5-10 minutes each time as I did not want to attract the attention of people to the nest.

On 2.iv.2005 I took a few photos of the bird at the hole from the street, an action that caught the attention of the people using the lane. A road-side bicycle repairer, whose shop is opposite the house, informed me that the parakeets had been nesting there for several years.

A search of observations on the nesting habits of the Plum-headed Parakeet in literature and on the Internet produced only a single reference to a website on parakeets

in which it is recorded that the species occasionally nests in crevices of buildings (<http://home.wanadoo.nl/psittaculaworld/Species/P-cyanocephala.htm>, accessed on 16.iv.2005). All other references to the breeding habits of the species refer to its tree hole nesting habit (Ali & Ripley 1983, Grimmett et al. 1998), although the Delhi Bird Club has beautiful photographs of the bird taking to nesting in a wooden nest-box placed on a tree (Gopi Sundar *in litt.*, April 2005).

During this period, I regularly observed the female going into the nest hole. In addition, on more than one occasion, I also observed the male disappear into the nest hole and remain there for at least several minutes at a time. It is likely that it was involved in incubating eggs and or brooding chicks. However, Ali & Ripley (1983) state that incubation and feeding of chicks appears to be the sole responsibility of the hen and further, the contribution of the male to the process, if any, is unknown. However, L. Namassivayan (*in litt.*, March 2005) informed me that in the Wynaad district of Kerala where he and his

colleagues have found many pairs nesting, they have observed and photographed both parents taking part in all family duties.

Additional observations of the nesting of Plum-headed Parakeet in human-built structures would be useful to understand whether this is a more common habit than has been previously observed. Secondly,

the contribution of the male in incubation and feeding of chicks needs to be properly documented.

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Birds of Sirumalai, Tamil Nadu

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I have never been as serious a birdwatcher as many contributors to *Indian Birds* and during the past ten years my birding has been pitifully casual. But I have always had a strong, latent interest in the activity. So, I have been keeping casual note of Sirumalai birdlife during my movements around the estate, especially those species that I think are uncommon. Through this note I bring to your notice how some of the birds listed as threatened in Santharam (2005), fare in Sirumalai.

Sirumalai is the eastern-most outcrop or spur of the Western Ghats and not, as held by some authorities, an independent range. For one thing, a look at any satellite map will validate what I am saying, with only the Dindigul or Kodai Road pass separating Sirumalai from the Palnis. The pass itself is only 10 to 15 KM wide and is mostly tableland about 150–300 m above m.s.l. And the Sirumalai range stretches about 45 km on the Dindigul Madurai road with its width being about 15–25 km. There is no independent range in Tamil Nadu which is as big – the comparable ranges, the Shevaroy, the Kalrayan and the Kollimalai, all being part of the Eastern Ghats complex.

The flora, of equivalent altitudes, is largely similar between Sirumalai and the Palnis – a comparison of Pallithanam (2001) with either Fyson (1932) or Matthew (1999) will bear this out.

The highest peak of the range abuts our estate (our boundary runs a third of the way up this peak) and is 1,560 m above m.s.l. The house I live in is 1,335 m above m.s.l., and the estate itself ranges from 1,160–1,400 m above m.s.l. The average altitude of the Sirumalai table-top is 1,250 m above m.s.l., with some outlying areas being c. 1,000–1,200 m. So, our climate is pretty much identical to that of Yercaud, the altitudes being similar.

Notes on some common birds in Sirumalai:

Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis*

Very common. Can be seen almost daily, flying low around the house (trying, no doubt, to get at the chicken run!) or perched on a *Terminalia bellerica* tree and preening. It is quite common all over Sirumalai, including at altitudes up to 1,066 m and I have noticed it several times myself. It is always single, a lazy, low, slow flyer and often simply perched on a convenient tree. **Ceylon Frogmouth** *Batrachostomus moniliger* Quite common. Visible at dusk – less so on our property than at places of slightly lower elevation, say 1,200–1,300 m. One evening, at about 20:00 hrs, one struck the wind-shield of our Jeep (it was probably disoriented by the lights), as we were returning to the estate up the Ghat road, at an elevation of about 1,000 m. I had the driver reverse to where the dying bird was lying and picked it up. It was a male Ceylon Frogmouth. The next day, I had him cleaned, dressed and prepared by one of the workers (we have more than a few who are quite good at it) but, as luck would have it, I was out of arsenic at the time. By the time a supply arrived it was late evening, and maggots had begun their work. My hopes of mounting it for the Bombay Natural History Society were dashed. But the bird is quite common in Sirumalai (and, I suspect, in the Palnis too, at least at similar altitudes, although I am not able to verify this).

Great Eared-Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis* Very common again. Usually found squatting in the middle of the road both inside the estate and, especially, on the public roads on the hill-top as well as the Ghat road. Early morning (around 05:00 hrs) drives out of the estate are the best time to see it, although it is seen through the night too, framed in the headlights of the Jeep until one is almost upon it, when this outsized nightjar rises up, wings a-flutter, and, flies in front of the vehicle for some time! That is the time to note the diagnostic neck-band, the large, mottled-brown wings and the (seemingly) ungainly

flight. I have also noticed its ear tufts at times, while it sat in the middle of the road. Most days, on some stretches of the road, one could see a bird every 30 m!

Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata* I won't say it is common – far from it, but I have seen this bird on the small lawn in front of the house, for three years running, always late in the spring or early summer. At first glimpse I wondered what a Verditer Flycatcher *E. thalassina* was doing there but then the pale breast was exposed and a quick look at a couple of handy field-guides established its identity. At least on one of the three seasons, I saw a pair, more than once. And, for such shy birds, they are quite venturesome, approaching within 6 m of us as we took tea on the lawn. I saw it mostly foraging on the ground, and occasionally on bush-tops, but never at greater heights than that.

Other interesting species: Of course, we have plenty of Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis*. I call them our 'signature birds' and am very proud of those big boys, weaving in and out effortlessly through and between our Silver Oaks' tops. They are seen almost daily and more than a few times sometimes, always circling under the Silver Oak canopy, never in any trouble weaving in and out between the close-planted trees! Occasionally they perch on a Silver Oak, but, being wary birds, unlike the Mountain Hawk-Eagle, never permit a close approach, flying off at the merest sign of movement.

The Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, which is very common in the Palnis, is conspicuous by its absence in our hills. The biotopes are similar between the hills but we do not have the Kurinchi *Strobilanthes kuntiana*, perhaps because we have 1,346 mm average rainfall as against 1,498 mm for the Lower Palnis, i.e., at comparable altitudes. Maybe the Emerald Dove prefers a marginally wetter climate, but I wonder. There are plenty of White-cheeked Barbets *Megalaima viridis* and Blue-winged