

Parakeets *Psittacula columbooides* all over the place - the latter preferring Guava trees for nesting. Also, the Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*, more heard than seen, but sometimes flying past, always in groups of six or eight, cobalt-blue wings glistening and, on such occasions, raucous screeches rather than song. And, interestingly, our resident (and fiercely aggressive) Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis* makes a very passable imitation of the Malabar Whistling-Thrush and the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* as

well as the Redwattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* - how he has learnt the call of the last I cannot say as the few we hear pass high overhead.

I have not used any Latin names because I still think *Rhopodytes viridirostris* for the Green-billed Malkoha (common in scrub and bush on lower slopes/foothills), but I am aware the evolutionary taxonomists or DNA wallahs have gone and revised that name!

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The birds at home

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Having lived all my life in the urban jungle of Kolkata (= Calcutta), I was fascinated by the greenery of my in-law's residence in rural Karnataka (Dakshin Kannad). The first things I noticed about my new home were the many birds in the garden and in the trees around the house and the family sawmill nearby. I did not, however, begin to study them seriously till about ten years ago when my husband presented me with a copy of Martin Woodcock's *Collins handguide to the birds of the Indian sub-continent including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Nepal*.

Armed with the book and an ancient pair of binoculars belonging to my father-in-law, I started taking great pleasure in identifying the birds around me. The black birds with forked tails were Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus*, the small purple bird with curved beak was the Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, the black and yellow bird that sang beautifully was the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, etc.

All my bird watching is done around my house and as I don't see the same birds week after week, the thrill of bird watching has not yet declined for me. Our garden has flowering plants like rose, jasmine, lantana, marigold and hibiscus and trees like coconut, areca nut, mango, jackfruit, chikoo and silk cotton. We also have plants like papaya, banana and pineapple. Though there is no water body here, the ditches get full with water from the surrounding elevated places in the monsoons and common kingfishers *Alcedo atthis*, red-wattled lapwings *Vanellus indicus* and white-breasted waterhens *Amaurornis phoenicurus* make their appearance. I have not made a scientific study of the birds but

I do take great pleasure in spending the early mornings of most Sundays roaming around our garden and the adjacent mill compound, together comprising about three and a half acres of land.

Cut logs stacked around the saw mill attract woodpeckers, wagtails, bee-eaters and flycatchers. There are two trees, locally called "Daddal" *Careya arborea* and "Maruwa or Hunal" *Terminalia paniculata*, which attract many birds. Sometimes I have seen more than fifteen or twenty species foraging on the trees at the same time. They are always visited by practically every species that can be seen here.

The plot adjacent to the mill compound was vacant till three years ago. It used to be visited by many birds, particularly babblers *Turdoides* spp., and Pittas *Pitta brachyura*. But now people have bought the land and built houses and as a result I no longer see these birds there.

One interesting fact is that Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* were the most common birds in the mill area. One could always see them on trees or on the logs. I once even found a nest, in a hole in one of the logs, containing three off-white pitted eggs. Funnily, there were never any Indian Robins in our house garden though only a simple fence separated the mill compound from the garden. About three years ago, the numbers of Indian Robins began to dwindle from the usual number of about five to ten pairs till I no longer saw them anymore. Their habitat, the logs and the trees, are still present, as is plenty of food in the shape of insects, and the only explanation seems to be that they were preyed upon by crows *Corvus* spp., and Greater Coucals *Centropus sinensis*. The disappearance of the Indian Robins also coincided with the

adjacent vacant plot getting filled.

The following is a list of the birds I have seen around my house in the past ten years.

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*

Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*

Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*

Indian Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus vernalis*

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*

Brainfever Bird *Hierococcyx varius*

Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*

Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*

Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*

House Swift *Apus affinis*

Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*

Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*

Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*

White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*

Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*

Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker *Picus chlorolophus*

Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*

Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*

Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*

Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*

Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera*

Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*

Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*

Ruby-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus gularis*

Red-whiskered Bulbul *P. jocosus*

Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*

Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*

Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*

Jerdon's Chloropsis *Chloropsis cochinchinensis*
 Golden-fronted Chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina*
 Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis*
 Indian Robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*
 Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*
 Black-headed Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*
 Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striatus*
 Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*
 Asian Paradise-Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*
 Black-naped Monarch-Flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea*

Tickell's Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
 Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*
 Loten's Sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia*
 Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca*
 Grey-headed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*
 Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*
 Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*
 Black-headed Oriole *O. xanthornus*
 Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*
 Ashy Drongo *D. leucophaeus*
 Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *D. paradiseus*
 Indian Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
 House Crow *Corvus splendens*
 Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

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Can we augment the Important Bird Area concept in India? The role of large landholdings outside Protected Areas

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Two crucial aspects to bird conservation are identifying areas that are important for birds and then protecting these areas from habitat destruction or other threats to wildlife. BirdLife International has made a promising start in finding key areas by coming up with criteria that can be used identify Important Bird Areas (IBAs). A recent compendium of IBAs in India (Islam & Rahmani 2004), compiled by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) through the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) highlights the utility of this approach.

Once important sites are identified, how should we go about protecting them? Some of these areas are already under nominal protection by the designated government agencies: the Forest Departments of various States. These areas stand notified as Protected Areas (PAs), such as Biosphere Reserves, Ramsar sites, National Parks, Tiger Reserves, Sanctuaries, and so on. If these wilderness entities were to be afforded the protection that their designated status prescribes, most of India's current biodiversity would be likely to survive in the long term.

Sadly, the reality is quite different. Today the entire network of PAs is under an unrelenting siege (political, administrative, socio-economic and societal), which constricts it increasingly by the day. Hardly a year passes without one or the other of these critical wildernesses being violated through their denotification as protected landscapes. Conservationists do protest, but are largely ignored by the State. Given this scenario, the IBA programme is a laudable concept, in that it shines the spotlight on areas important for bird

conservation, regardless of whether or not these areas are under legal protection. But highlighting valuable wilderness areas is only the first step: what should we do next?

One strategy to protect key areas is to purchase them outright. This option has been successfully pursued by BirdLife International's partner in the UK, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The RSPB purchases land where needed, and establishes a scientifically managed bird reserve under its own ownership. Where the looming extinction of a species is attributed basically to the loss of its habitat (e.g. Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) and the fight for its survival has reached a critical juncture, the strategy of purchasing land would appear to be the only pragmatic course of action with high probability of success.

Regrettably, we in India have little chance of adopting this strategy. Wilderness areas in India usually fall under land classified by the government as agricultural, wasteland, or forest. The limit to private ownership of agricultural land under our laws is in the region of 20 ha, so there is little chance of acquiring a large, contiguous patch. Acquiring government "wasteland" or forest land is next to impossible. Furthermore, the demands on land for agricultural, industrial and urban needs are so extensive and growing by the day that altogether this strategy will find few enthusiasts. And lastly, it is a tall order indeed for the BNHS or any other Indian conservation organisation to be able to raise the funds for purchasing even one substantial area, say 1000 ha in extent, to provide space just for one species (like the

Jerdon's Courser) threatened with extinction by the loss of its habitat. So, we must look to other options.

Conservation outside Protected Areas

Today, with forest cover declining at alarming rates, our wildlife is being pushed to extreme limits of survival. This being so, we should press for the conservation of all remaining habitat that have the potential to support populations of wild species, whether or not these habitats are under the control of the Forest Department. I suggest that we should negotiate partnerships with establishments, public and private, that own vast real estate, which in many cases are already avian havens or have the potential to become so. Such areas are unlikely to hold much intact forest, but instead may contain woodland or other habitats, and still be valuable for conservation.

The kind of areas that come to mind are on the very extensive campuses that are under that control of large government establishments and private enterprises. Such areas exist in every biogeographic zone of India. Large wooded areas have become a common feature in the layout of the work places and living spaces of these organisations. Almost as a rule, these spaces are inviolate to trespass, with their perimeters being walled or fenced. Besides providing security to the inhabitants and equipment, these measures also ensure that the enclosed wooded areas are relatively undisturbed. In large part, these areas will not fit the criteria for inclusion as IBAs. Nevertheless, they are of potential importance for conservation (as I describe below), and the IBCN would do well to use