Breeding of the Oriental White Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* at Kumarakom heronry (Kerala, India)

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Kumarakom heronry at Kerala Tourism Development Corporation (KTDC) Tourist Complex of Kumarakom, Kottayam, is an important site for breeding waterbirds such as Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*, Indian Shag *Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Median Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*, Large Egret *Casmerodius albus*, Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* and Purple Heron *Ardea cinerea* in Kerala, from the time it was first 'discovered' by Neelakantan (1984). A recent study in the colonial nesting waterbirds in Kumarakom revealed the presence of a large breeding colony of near threatened Oriental White Ibises *Threskiornis melanocephalus* (BirdLife International, 2001). Nesting of the Oriental White Ibis is a new addition to the nesting of birds at Kumarakom and a breeding range-extension of the species into Kerala in recent years. This area formerly known as the Baker Estate, measures 112 acres. Situated 14 km west of Kottayam town, and at the eastern fringe of Vembanad Lake, a Ramsar Site and one of the biggest estuaries in the south-west coast of India. The Tourist Complex lies between 76^0 25' - 76^0 26' E and 9^0 37' - 9^0 38' N. Sixty-four nests of the Oriental White Ibis were found in this heronry during July – September 2004. Earlier nesting of Oriental White Ibis was not recorded from this part. This is the second nesting report of this species from Kerala. First nesting report was by Balakrishnan & Thomas (2004) from Panamaram heronry of Wayanad district; seven nests were reported during 2002 and 2003. During the first week of June the Oriental White Ibis population was less in the heronry but the species was found to be very common in the nearby paddy fields. Towards the middle of the month its number increased to 128. Although the birds in breeding plumage were spotted in the locality, they spent more time inside the heronry than other periods.

Five nests of the Oriental White Ibis were found on 08.vi.2004, in a mangrove tree *Sonneratia caseolaris* overgrown with a mangrove associate *Flagellaria indica* [a climber with disjunct distribution in the west coast of India (Pradeep 2002)] standing in the marsh. These five nests were found on the same tree along with a nest of the Large Egret. On 14.vi.2004 another 27 nests were found in the marsh built on an exotic mangrove associate *Annona glabra* covered with *Flagellaria indica.* Total 64 nests of Oriental White Ibises were found at the site from first of week of July to September. Every week its number was also noted, their highest count was 208 and the lowest was 37. They were present at a mean density of 103 $\pm$ 22.88 in the heronry (July 87.75 $\pm$ 29.45, August 120.10 $\pm$ 53.38). In the meantime 37 nestlings and 14 juveniles were observed from the heronry. Ali (1984) and Ali & Ripley (2001) have reported the nesting season of Oriental White Ibis in south India from November to March, the present observations indicate a nesting season which is different from the earlier reports.

Oriental White Ibis used one mangrove species *Sonneratia caseolaris* and three mangrove associates *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, *Annona glabra*, *Flagellaria indica* for nesting. The mean height of the trees the species used to build nest was 02.59 $\pm$ 01.66m from the water level. Where as in Wayanad, they used to nest in bamboos of the genus *Bambusa* with a mean height of the nests being 7 $\pm$ 0.45m (see Balakrishnan and Thomas 2004, for details), which was more than that of the present nesting area. According to Burger (1985) nesting in marshes reduces the effect of mammalian predation this may be the reason for the use of short trees in the marshland here in Kumarakom heronry for nesting compared to the Wayanad; but Kumarakom heronry does not have such potential terrestrial mammalian predators. Interestingly all these trees or plants except *Sonneratia caseolaris* are seen in the dykes also, but they did not prefer the plants standing on the dykes. This may have been due to increased human pressure. They deserted the nest close to the dykes at the approach of man and later the eggs in the nests were predated by the House Crow *Corvus splendens*, especially during the August. Thus, local people and tourists often became a great threat to the breeding birds in the heronry. On 28.vii.2004; 21 nests built in the marsh were found totally destroyed and later, clues of the human interference in the marsh towards the nesting site were obtained from the site. According to Donazar et al. (1994), predation was usual in ibis colonies, which are very susceptible to human disturbance in breeding colonies.

We heard the call of chicks, observed foraging trips made by Oriental White Ibis and bringing of nesting material from interior part of the marsh by the birds, especially in the central part and low levels of marsh and other inaccessible places. The nests built in those parts are not included in the report and hence the actual number of nests in the area may well have been higher than the number reported here. Mukherjee et al. (2002) faced similar problem when studying the status and breeding of the Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* in Gujarat.

Apart from the, Oriental White Ibis, another near threatened bird, the Darter is also found to breed in great concentration at

the site. Unfortunately, the site does not have the protected status. The KTDC is not taking care to protect the land and often clears the pure stands of *Phragmites karka,* where most of the Purple Herons, Median Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons used to nest, to get better view of birds in the name of tourism. In 1989 the Wildlife Advisory Board of Kerala, recommended the Government to declare the Baker Estate as a Bird Sanctuary. However, against the scientific advice, 13 hectares of the land was given to a venture company. The company cleared the mangrove and converted it into a lawn and constructed a tourist jetty. With this, a species of mangrove called *Kandelia candel* was totally wiped out (Ramachandran and Mohanan 1990). Considering these problems at the site, we strongly recommend that this heronry must be protected as a bird sanctuary.

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New site record of the Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* from the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu (India)

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The southern Indian endemic Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* (Ali & Ripley 1987; BirdLife International 2001) was recorded at the Anuvavi Subramaniar temple (11°03.5'N 76°50.9'E; 690 m a.s.l.), in the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu (India). The species is included in the Vulnerable (Vu) category of the *Red Data Book* (BirdLife International 2006). The locality where the species was sighted is a small village called Peiyathadakam, which is situated 22 km southwest of Coimbatore city. This area is a junction of an offshoot of the Western Ghats and the plains of Coimbatore. These plains are a mosaic of cultivation and comprise small and large-scale brick factories. Anuvavi Subramaniar temple is situated on the northern slope of the above mentioned offshoot, found about 3 km south of the Coimbatore–Anaikatty road. Thorny bushes and exotic *Prosopis juliflora* shrubs dominate lower areas of the hill, but the vicinity of the temple has a degrading patch of evergreen and semi-evergreen trees, which includes *Ficus* spp. Habitat above the temple is rocky with scrub vegetation, a 'typical' habitat of Yellow-throated Bulbul. This species also frequents a variety of other habitats ranging from open, sparse thorn-scrub and dense scrub jungle to mixed dry and moist-deciduous forest with dense undergrowth, generally on boulder-strewn hillsides, around rocky outcrops or on isolated hillocks, from 600 m to 1,200 m (Subramanya 2004; Subramanya et al. in press; BirdLife International 2006).

We visited the temple on Tamil New Year (14.iv.2005). Two medium-sized banyan trees *Ficus bengalensis* grow along the boundary of the temple. These were fruiting, attracting many birds and even though it was not a bird watching trip, we did

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