

# Southern-most breeding record of the Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* from India

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The Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* was found to be breeding in Koonthakulam village (8°29'41"N 77°45'21"E), close to Koonthakulam Bird Sanctuary in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, India.

Initially a bird was found nesting inside a hollow space in a haystack, during the fourth week of December 2006. Ten eggs were found in the nest, and the bird was seen flying in and out of the haystack. The villagers demolished the haystack in a couple of days after its discovery, and the fate of the eggs is unknown. Later, on 18th January 2007, an adult duck was seen leading 12 ducklings in a small rain-fed temporary pond about 60 m long and 40 m wide, next to the Koonthakulam bus stop. A drake too was seen attending to the young, on and off. The birds appeared to be unafraid of the people around them, including a TV cameraman who happened to be there at that time.

When we were ready with a camera, the following day, there were only nine ducklings and the duck. It is possible that the drake had flown away and the missing ducklings were lost to predation. Now the duck was more wary and even the chicks kept a distance from us. The mother flew up and away abruptly every 20-25 minutes and came back in less than ten minutes. About five minutes before each of these temporary take-offs, the bird slowly drifted away from the chicks and stayed aloof. While returning too, the bird landed, far away from the young, and then moved very slowly towards them. The young ones too did not rush to the mother on her arrival. We could not hear any sound uttered by the young, or the mother, possibly due to our distance from the birds. The pond was completely open to the sky and there was no cover to shelter the young. However, the ducklings were seen diving under water occasionally. The duck was not seen to feed the young or lead them around to forage as long as we were around. We watched these birds from 09.30-11.40 hrs and planned to visit the site again the next day with a hide for close-up photographs. However, the villagers reported that the mother led the ducklings away that night, through the *Prosopis* patch behind the houses.

In addition to this interesting breeding record, we have been observing this species at Koonthakulam Bird Sanctuary throughout the year-since 2002-except when the wetlands were totally dry. Up to 255 birds were seen here, at a time, in March 2005.

We also observed the Comb Duck in 2004 at Suchindram (8°15'N 77°48'E) and Theroor (8°10'N 77°28'E) wetlands of Kanyakumari district, which are located at the extreme southern tip of mainland India. At Suchindram wetlands we saw three individuals on 21st January 2004 (one of them with

the 'comb') and four on 3rd February 2004. At Theroor wetlands we saw the following birds in March 2004: four birds on the 6th, three on the 10th and three on the 17th.

Two subspecies of *Sarkidiornis melanotos* have been globally recognised, namely *Sarkidiornis m. melanotos* (Pennant, 1769) and *Sarkidiornis m. sylvicola* H. & R. Ihering, 1907. The nominate race is resident and locally migratory in India. According to Ripley (1961) this subspecies occurs in most parts of India. However, Ali & Ripley (1961) limit its southern range of distribution to Karnataka. Ravindran (1998) recently sighted it farther south, in Kerala. Rasmussen & Anderton (2004) show its range up to northern Kerala. Breeding of this species has not been reported so far in southern Peninsular India.

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Fig. 1. Comb Duck

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