

Of larks, owls and unusual diets and feeding habits

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A day with the larks

18th January 2007: Suresh Jones and I were off on waterfowl counts at some wetlands near Rishi Valley, (Andhra Pradesh, India). It was a cool and crisp morning with clear skies. After a year of rains the wetlands had begun drying up. We knew there would be fewer birds for us to count this year. We were least bothered since we were sure to find other interesting birds.

I was just telling Suresh that I have, in the past, seen Indian Eagle-Owls *Bubo benghalensis* perched on roadside electric posts, when a dead Indian Eagle-Owl, on the road, drew our attention. It was a road-hit from the previous night or early that morning. We viewed with awe the massive claws and powerful feet as we lifted it and consigned it to the privacy of some roadside bushes.

After the dead owl at the start, the day really belonged to the larks. Of the five species encountered that day, the Jerdon's Bushlark *Mirafra affinis* was the least conspicuous. The Eastern Skylark *Alauda gulgula* was in song on the grassy margins of the Pedda Tippa Samudram (PTM) tank and also at the Kandukur tank, which is on the border with Karnataka. Another lark that was seen in large numbers was the Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*. We counted flocks of 65 at PTM and over 200 birds at Kandukur, feeding and moving about on the open areas of the tanks' margins. We were surprised at the large numbers. I have seen these birds earlier in the vicinity of Chennai in the 1980s.

Two other larks seen at the Kandukur tank were equally interesting. On several of my earlier visits to PTM and Kandukur, I had suspected the presence of the endemic Sykes's Crested Lark *Galerida deva*. However due to lack of confirmed sightings, I had tentatively included it in my list. But today, armed with a good spotting scope (15–45X), it was easy to distinguish the bird and identify its features. Seen along with the similar-looking Eastern Skylark, they could be told apart by their faint streaks restricted to the throat region, more rufous wash on their under parts and

the presence of the distinctly long crest, which when flattened, reached the upper nape. There were at least four birds present that morning.

The last species of the day was the common Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark *Eremopterix grisea*, which was noticed in the more drier, open country. The prized sighting that morning was an albino specimen fluttering about in the stiff breeze like a sheet of paper (which we mistook it for, initially!). Its plumage, including the beak, was pinkish white. Its eye appeared darker and there was a faint pinkish wash on its breast and tail. This made the bird stand out against a sober background of grass and stone. We followed the bird for over five minutes as it moved about while feeding. It did not appear particularly shy and allowed us to study it at a fairly close range.

A search for reports on albino birds in India using the electronic database prepared by Aasheesh Pittie produced some 30 records of species ranging from vultures to crows. True albinism is a rare condition among birds. Usually birds seen are partial albinos, distinguished by normal eye, leg colourations. This specimen too appeared to be a partial albino since it had darker eye colouration.

Suresh made another trip later that week to photograph the bird but could not locate it. Since the bird was conspicuous and easily spotted, we wonder if it fell an easy prey to predators.

Calls of some owls of Rishi Valley

A couple of colleagues, some students of the Rishi Valley School and I located a pair of Brown Fish-Owls *Ketupa zeylonensis* amongst the boulders on our visit to the hill east of our campus on the morning of 17th December 2006. Subsequently, over the next few weeks, I received regular reports from students that the birds were seen at the same location, confirming my suspicion that they could be nesting. This has been a favourite nesting site for the owls, despite its barren looks.

On the morning on 4th March 2007, I was up at 0300 hrs to witness the lunar eclipse and in the stillness of the morning, I could clearly hear the shrill, high-pitched whistle-like notes (somewhat ventriloquial in nature) of the young Brown Fish-Owls, about 500 m from my residence, from the direction of the nest. I visited the nest site on 8th and 13th April 2007 and located the two young and an adult bird. The chicks were about $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of the adult and had noticeably darker head colouration. They also lacked the whitish throat pattern, so conspicuous in adults. On my second visit, I could see that the chicks were able to fly short distances and were quite active.

Surprisingly, these calls have not been described in any of the standard field guides. I have been regularly hearing these calls for the past several years here whenever the birds have young ones and these seem to be begging calls. Geetha Iyer (1997 *Mayura* 14: 69–71) had referred to them as “squeaky” and said they sounded “more like a Pariah Kite *Milvus migrans*”. They can be loud and on a still night, carry fairly long distances. These calls are intermittently heard at dusk and through the night. The calls could be heard even



Clement Francis

Greater Short-toed Lark

in mid-June (at the time of writing this), though less frequently. Last year too, the pattern was similar with the birds commencing breeding activities in winter (December–January). I have had birds visiting our tiled rooftops in the evenings or early mornings and these calls give away their presence.

The Mottled Wood-Owls *Strix ocellata* too have been active in the campus after a gap of a couple of years and were seen and heard regularly last year. The tamarind tree near the junior school appeared to be the roost this year. On several occasions, I got to observe the birds without disturbing them. One of the calls that I had always heard since 1998 in Rishi Valley, but could not confirm with certainty, was an interrogative hoot. This was finally identified as a call of this species. I have heard the calls both at dawn and dusk and several times late in the night. Usually when one bird calls, a second bird responds. There is a noticeable variation in the pitch between the two call notes, the first—interrogative—being on a higher pitch than the second.

On some unusual diets and feeding habits

At the coconut grove near the vegetable garden, I noticed on the afternoon of 17th May 2007, a pair of Black-shouldered Woodpeckers *Chrysocolaptes festivus*. While the male was resting quietly on the tree trunk, the female was busy pecking a small coconut above and its actions appeared to indicate it was feeding. After 3–4 minutes, the birds moved to another tree before flying away from view. I have not noticed this feeding behaviour earlier, though I have spent a lot of time in the coconut grove where the birds have excavated cavities in almost all the coconut trunks—which are usually occupied by other cavity nesters like Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*, Rose-ringed Parakeets *Psittacula krameri*, Spotted Owlets *Athene brama* and Indian Rollers *Coracias benghalensis*.

I then recollected reading about the coconut-woodpecker debate triggered in the 1970's in issues of the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Mr Zafar Futehally had recently written about this in his *Deccan Herald* column and I located this by chance on the Internet. I would like to quote the following passages from his writing [<http://www.deccanherald.com/Archives/aug282005/finearts647472005827.asp>]:

“In the July 1970 issue of the newsletter, Kumar Ghorpade, entomologist and bird-enthusiast, wrote: ‘During my last visit to our estate in Yelburga taluk (Raichur district, Mysore) in June 1969, I had to shoot a lovely male specimen of the Blackbacked Woodpecker *C. festivus* at the special request of the local peasants...The farmers of this area have labelled this and other woodpeckers as troublesome pests of the coconut tree, asserting that the birds made holes into the nuts and sucked the milk inside. At first I was a bit disinclined to believe this somewhat tall story, but on (their) repeated allegations...I resolved to try and figure out this interesting phenomenon.

“I examined the fallen nuts and sure enough found small holes at the base of the nut, near the ‘eyes’ or depressions (which, incidentally, are the weakest part of the nut shell). Quite a few of the dried-up fallen nuts had one such hole each, which certainly looked like the woodpecker’s handiwork to me. My next move

was to try and catch the culprit at work...to my indignation the birds never returned anywhere near the nuts...They confined themselves to the coconut tree trunks...’

“The *Newsletter*’s August issue had a rejoinder from Prof. K. K. Neelakantan, a leading ornithologist from Kerala. He was an ardent bird-lover and a very careful observer. I was sure he would take umbrage at Ghorpade’s referring to the woodpecker as the culprit and showing his indignation at the bird not turning up when he wanted. I was glad when he responded, ‘My own acquaintance of the Blackbacked Woodpecker was too short to permit me to undertake a defence of this species, but I know the lesser Goldenbacked well enough to say that it does not bore holes in coconuts at any stage of its growth...I have never once seen a woodpecker on a fruit of the coconut tree. The Goldenbacked Woodpecker is a regular visitor to the crowns of the coconut tree and spends much time probing the recesses of the fronds, pulling out and flinging down large masses of decayed fibrous material...feeding on beetles and their grubs as well as removing large quantities of decomposed fibre...the woodpecker renders very valuable service to the trees and their owners.’

“We ourselves are quite familiar with the activities of the woodpeckers in coconut gardens and though we have often seen both semi-ripe and completely dry nuts on the ground with holes in the bottom, we are quite sure that this damage is caused by rats and squirrels.”

I do hope I will not be triggering fresh debate through this note!

Another interesting observation I made concerned a Shikra *Accipiter badius* and an Indian Pond-Heron *Areola grayii*. On 10th April 2007, I noticed an Indian Pond-Heron in flight, briefly pursued by a female Shikra. The Shikra attempted an attack on the heron and missed it. I was not sure if this was a serious attack or a casual one since the Shikra circled once and flew away not bothering to attack again, though the heron was still around. Rishad Naoroji in his book, *The birds of Prey of the Indian sub-continent* (2006), mentions that the Shikra feeds on smaller birds up to the size of chicken and pigeons. He also recorded that trained Shikras used to be flown at larger birds up to the size of young Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* and Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*.

At 1930 hrs on 19th May 2007, a movement caught my attention as I sat

outside the school’s dining hall. It was a male Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* foraging for insects under the roadside tube light, some 15 m away from me. It also gave a brief call once. It was dark by now and it was quite late in the day for a diurnal bird like the Oriental Magpie-Robin to be foraging. The next day again I saw the bird active around 1940 hrs. Two days later my sons spotted the bird a little earlier, around 1905 hrs, though it was not fully dark on this occasion. Looking up Aasheesh’s bibliography, I could find references to several records of birds foraging in the night—including Indian Roller, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, vultures, etc. Perhaps the Oriental Magpie-Robin had a nest and was busy collecting insects for its chicks. Since I had to leave the campus for the next few days, I could not follow-up and see if the bird continued foraging so late in the evening.



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Brown Fish Owl