

A photographic record of a displaying Malayan Night-Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* in Goa, India

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Fig. 1. Malayan Night-Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus*

For a warm and humid morning at Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary, situated in South Goa, bordering Karnataka, birding on 23 May 2010 was not too bad. We had been welcomed by the calls of the Asian Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella* and Grey-headed Bulbuls *Pycnonotus priocephalus*. We stumbled twice on a pair of Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* and at least five times on its spectacularly coloured male. An Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica* seemed unusually comfortable just a few meters away from our car. Through the thick canopy we got a view of the majestic Crested Serpent Eagle *Spilornis cheela* on two occasions. Once we saw it being 'chased' rather unceremoniously by an angry pair of Racket-tailed Drongos *Dicrurus paradiseus*. The reason we suspected was that either the Crested Serpent Eagle had ventured too close to the nest or had actually made its way into the nest

of the Racket-tailed Drongos. A female Malabar Pied Hornbill *Anthraceroceros coronatus* also gave us a quick stare before flying away noisily.

But the cherry on the cake was the sudden and unusual sighting of the extremely rare Malayan Night-Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus*. Here is how it happened! After many unsuccessful attempts at photographing the handsome male Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii*, which kept scampering away, into the thick

bushes every time we slowed the car, we nearly gave up on it. So the next moment we heard some rustling in the leaves, we turned our heads casually towards the sound, but this time it turned out to be a brownish bird resembling a bittern. Only when it stopped to stare at us did we identify it as the beautiful male of the Malayan Night-Heron (Fig. 1). It appeared to be puffing its throat, and walking around without minding our presence. Then it sneaked into the bushes and disappeared.

Ecstatic but unsatisfied with this unexpected encounter we decided to return again to the same area a bit later. An hour and an half later, when we returned, we found our prayers and persistence had paid off. There was a pair of them by the roadside in the same area. Upon seeing our car approaching one bird (female?) scampered into the thicket, hence we could not get its photograph. However, the male as earlier, waited, and watched us. This time we noticed that its purplish-black crown was erect and all the brown feathers on the neck and back were fluffed-up (Fig. 2). While it did that, it took a few steps forward uttering a 'thuk thuk thuk thuk' sound, which appeared to erupt from deep down its gut. Then it froze for sometime upturning leaf litter probably feeding, before resuming this act. It appeared very obvious to us that it was displaying to the bird on the other side of the road, perhaps somewhere behind the bushes. We witnessed this behaviour for about 20 min. It did not seem to mind our car or our antics from inside it trying to photograph, film, and sound record the bird; that is if it could at all see us through the glass, and seemed unconcerned at the occasional popping out of our heads or lenses. When it did not receive a response from the other bird it turned around and disappeared into the thicket slowly and steadily.

On the Indian Subcontinent, the Malayan Night-Heron has so far been reported from the Southern Western Ghats, North-eastern India, Nicobar Island, and Sri Lanka. It breeds in the Western Ghats from May to August, during the monsoons (Ali & Ripley 2001). This is perhaps the first photographic record of the bird from Goa, and probably the first of it displaying.

Reference

Ali, S., & Ripley, S. D., 2001. *Handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. Vol 1. 2nd ed. Pp. i-lxiii, 1-384. Delhi: (Sponsored by Bombay Natural History Society.) Oxford University Press [Oxford India Paperbacks].



Fig. 2. Malayan Night-Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* displaying.