of the hunting strategy of this snake ["On seeing prey, the forebody is slowly raised, and coiled in a zig-zag manner and at the opportune moment darted forward to unerringly catch the prey just behind the head, drag it off its support and keep it dangling till its struggles cease. It then swallows the prey, which may take more than half an hour after capture…"] matched our own sighting, as to what happens after the prey is captured, although we did not observe the actual capture of the bird. But life-and-death struggles as the one described are not witnessed everyday, and we considered it worthy of record.

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Introduction to natural history through birds

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"Are they kids to fight and make such a noise?" remarked a little girl while observing some parakeets creating a cacophony perched atop a Gulmohur tree at Cubbon Park one day. This was heard at a nature trail conducted for five-year olds. This and more innocent and interesting comments as well as intriguing questions by children make me ponder about the impact that birds and other wildlife can have on young minds. The way children (and adults) can relate to nature, if oriented in the right way, is noteworthy!

Being involved with sharing information on natural history, I have always hoped that in the bargain, I'd be able to do a little more for a change in attitude than just what the work demanded. The thought that I could take help from birds for this purpose is perhaps well summed up by Sir David Attenborough in his book '*The life of birds*.'

Attenborough says, "It is easy to understand why so many of us are so fond of birds. They are lively; they are lovely; and they are everywhere. They have characters with which we can easily identify – cheeky and shy, gentle and vicious, faithful – and faithless. Many enact the dramas of their lives in full view for all to see. They are part of our world yet, at a clap of our hands, they lift into the air and vanish into their own with a facility that we can only envy. And they are an ever-present link with the natural world that lies beyond our brick walls. It is hardly surprising that human beings have studied birds with a greater dedication and intensity than they have lavished on any other group of animal."

This is something that all of us interested in birds must have experienced time and again. And each time one tends to be intrigued, wonder-struck and spellbound!

It was with the view to generate interest in natural history that one day, many years ago, I offered to go out with a group of Zoology teachers to a wilderness area. I was looking forward to this interaction, hoping to learn something from this congregation of formally oriented intellectuals, but was highly disappointed!

My interaction with the teachers was for a few minutes before lunch. Luckily for me, a little creature decided to venture upon me before I spoke with them. It was an ant-mimicking spider and I "held on" to this little fellow until it was my turn to address the audience. When I got my chance, I summoned them to have a closer look at the not so glamorous little fellow on my palm. The audience, who had by now settled well into their chairs, reluctantly got up and came closer to me. They all peered at my palm; some were even adventurous to pull my hand for a closer look. And, almost in unison, they said it was an insect, while others were specific and said it was an ant.

At this stage, I coaxed them to have a second look at the creature as I differed with their identification. Most of them stuck to their identification while others were noncommittal. Agreed, the mimicry was very good! But what surprised me was the lack of careful observation prior to identification, that too for a group of people formally trained in the subject. I ended my interaction by saying that all of zoology cannot be taught between the four walls of the classroom. Of course not failing to add that students (along with their teachers) should venture outdoors at least once in a while to learn zoology as this would then help in putting into perspective the classroom learning.

There is a formal need to encourage nature study – call it by any name, field biology, ecology, research, etc. The skill set required for field study is already on the endangered list. The need to educate and encourage development of such skills is imperative to save them from going the dodo way. Birdwatching as a hobby can give students an ample opportunity to learn more about a host of other aspects of natural history apart from birds. It also provides for learning skills that are not formally taught.

Besides learning, one can also, by constant practice, hone skills. This is essential. In times when biodiversity is one of the most discussed global issues, it becomes important to have people with identification skills. Birds are excellent subjects to start with as they provide for non-invasive field identification, particularly with the plethora of field guides available in the market today. Naming birds is the first step towards doing something more productive for their conservation. As Malcolm Tait says in his article in *The Ecologist* (July/August 2003), "You have to be aware before you can care."

This being the case, I have always wondered why students of life sciences, at least at the degree level, are not exposed to the fascinating hobby of birdwatching. Moreover, many are often ignorant / misinformed, even about the fundamental aspects of biology / natural history despite being prescribed in their curriculum. The experience that I have narrated above probably explains why students are not interested in natural history and also explains the lacunae in our education system. What is true for birds is true for most other wildlife; a lot of it is overlooked by many of us.

An interest in natural history need not necessarily be restricted to students of life sciences. It is something any one with an inclination towards nature can indulge in. Over two decades of birdwatching, I have seen several people getting interested in birds.

Birds provide an opportunity to understand the ways in which nature functions. Interdependence and interaction among organisms, the diversity in life forms, their form and function, ecology, and biology to mention a few.

Incidentally, amateurs have contributed a lot to the wealth of knowledge about birds, complementing and supplementing the contributions of professionals. This only tells us that there is much more out there than we already know, waiting to be noticed and reported. So, the more the people getting into serious bird study, the better!

In spite of the rather depressing side of the story that I have detailed above, there is another brighter, cheerful side to all this. Looking at the world around us, I am amazed to see how much birds have already influenced the young and old alike - people from all walks of life. Though the regular birdwatching outings in Bangalore stand testimony to this, the numbers are still very small and the interest cursory.

Birds continue to inspire not just birdwatchers and ornithologists, but also authors, scientists, poets, painters, dancers and fashion designers. Needless to say, a lot of authors have resorted to writing bird books for expression of their finding and feelings. Birds also satisfy the gastronomic desires of society, forming an integral part of traditions such as 'Thanksgiving'. They also find their way into our social lives. Most catholic weddings are incomplete without the popular 'Birdie Dance'. Tchaikovsky has enthralled ballet audiences with his 'Swan Lake'.

Birds have also contributed several words and proverbs to the English language. "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush" or "Birds of the same feather flock together".

Lastly, curiosity, interaction with fellow birdwatchers, some reading, and exploration of the valuable insight all this provides, has caused enlightened folk, in the recent past, to shift their focus to a variety of other organisms like butterflies, spiders, plants, etc. Many of them have very little or no formal education in Life Sciences. This is a very encouraging sign indeed.

All this suggests only one thing. Anyone can take interest in birds and other aspects of natural history. Birds and bird study have contributed much to the way we "think and do" science. On the scientific front, they have made field identification acceptable. Amongst the zoological sciences, bird study has perhaps done most to the philosophy of "*Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*". They have brought about an attitude change. But we still have a long way to go, and more serious-minded people are needed to take the process further and better our understanding of our feathered friends.

Recoveries from *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* – 4.

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It will be seen that initially our newsletters were formless. They had no standard "morphology". Long articles, short notes, correspondence, were all at sixes and sevens. It is interesting to note how long it took to establish a common format – Contents – Editorial – Articles – Correspondence. This evolution is an interesting study of my own disordered mind.

Starting with No. 3, February 1961 and continued over the next three issues, I included portions of an article courtesy *New Scientist*, titled "The geography of birds". It was a splendid piece and I reproduce a few paragraphs to indicate its main content and approach:

"Although they are free to fly wherever they please, few birds are cosmopolitan. After 150 million years of evolution in a constantly changing environment, most species are confined to provincial abodes…

"When birds took to the air, some 150 million years before the Wright brothers, they had a highway to every possible habitat on the earth's surface. Today they are at home in the Polar Regions and the tropics, in forest and desert, on mountain and prairie and on the ocean and its islands. Yet when one considers the superb mobility of birds and the aeons of time they have had to populate the globe, it is surprising how few cosmopolitan species there are. Some shore and sea birds – sandpipers and plovers, petrels and gulls – are fairly worldwide in distribution. The barn owls, kingfishers, hawks and acrobatic swallows are at home on every continent. Ravens have inherited the earth except, for some obscure reason, South America. But what we mostly see, especially in land birds, is a picture of curiously limited and seemingly haphazard distribution.

"Why are the birds of England and Japan more alike, though 7,000 miles apart, than the birds of Africa and Madagascar, separated by a mere 250 miles? Why does South America have more than 400 species of hummingbird, and Africa, with quite similar habitats, not a single one? Why have the finches, found on even the most isolated oceanic islands, not found their way to Australia? Why does the North American turkey, Benjamin Franklin's nominee for our national bird, occur nowhere else in the world? How explain the even more circumscribed range of the wirebird plover, unique to the little island of Saint Helena; or the confinement of a species of Ecuadorian hummingbird to the slopes of the volcano Chimborazo at an elevation of 16,000 feet; or the perilous distinction of the 161 remaining Laysan teal that inhabit the tiniest range of all, the shores of a marshy lagoon, one square mile in area, on the tiny Hawaiian island of Laysan…

"Even without man, of course, the bright tapestry of bird geography will continue to be alternately torn and mended by the wearing and restorative forces of nature. But since man has willy-nilly taken a hand in the process, we must hope he will acquire the wisdom to provide refuge for the most threatened species before they too go the way of the dodo…"

Unfortunately, newsletter No. 5 of April 1961 has become extinct and I proceed with No. 6 of May 1961. It starts with an absorbing piece by K. S. Lavkumar, then of Rajkumar College, Rajkot, describing the different feeding habits of waders. He wrote, "A very interesting difference in the ecological needs of the Common Sandpiper to those of the others of the same genus could be noticed in that whereas the former bird was quite plentiful on rocks, or open sand, shingle or mud along stretches of cleaner water, the other sandpipers were equally if not more common in the grass-edged, sewage-sullied water below the confluence of the main sewer.