

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.

Zafar Futehally

#2205 Oakwood Apartment, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala, 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560034, India.

Email: zafar123@vsnl.net

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.

Similarly, the Little Ringed Plover, and the Temminck's Stint seemed to prefer rocks, sand or open mud. The other sandpipers and waders show a greater propensity to wade out into the shallows or even alight on the thickly matted floats of plants growing in deeper water. This latter seems a favourite feeding mode of the Spotted Sandpipers. The Marsh Sandpiper is chiefly a wader foraging in the water rather than along its edges.

"It was also interesting to note the total absence of the fish-eating River Tern which is a common bird on all the rivers of Saurashtra, while the few migratory Caspian and Gull-billed Terns which did pass over, flew without a downward glance at the sullied water. Pied and Common Kingfishers both fish-eating birds, were absent. A similar polarisation in species of egrets was obvious. Cattle Egrets present in large flocks but the other egrets were few and far between, and both the Grey and Purple Herons though present, were uncommon..."

The next was a valuable article by Salim Ali requesting readers to report on roosts of Rosy Pastors *Pastor roseus*. He describes roosts, which he came across in Kutch, Gujarat and Delhi. This is what he said about roosts in Delhi, "Roost observed 14th and 15th April. Occupation continuing. Swarms concentrating at sunset to roost in a grove of rather scattered but large and dense thickets of *Salvadora persica* at Raisina, near the transmitting station of All India Radio. The birds were reported to have come here only within the last ten days. All now in perfect summer plumage and evidently on passage to their northern breeding grounds. Party after party of 10 to 50 birds, and dense well-drilled formations of 500 arriving from all directions, flying at great speed close above the ground, sweeping up suddenly from time to time as if to clear some imaginary obstacle ('hedge-hopping'), wheeling, banking, and circling in the air before alighting on bare trees and *Salvadora* bushes in packed,

typically starling-like clusters, and overflowing on to the ground. Numbers difficult to estimate: may be 25,000 or 50,000 birds, or more! Were reported on the evening of 15 April to have decreased noticeably..."

The other items in this issue related to the problem of choosing a national bird for India. It will be recalled that Salim Ali opted for the Great Indian Bustard, while members of the Lok Sabha decided on the Peacock. There was also a reference to the 13th International Ornithological Congress to be held at Cornell University in June 1962. The Secretary General then was Charles C. Sibley. In the correspondence section there was a letter from Dr W. Rydzewski, editor of *The Ring*, Wroclaw, Poland. He arranged for an exchange between *The Ring* and our newsletter, and from *The Ring* we were able to discover some fascinating facts about the long distance migration of birds as a result of the information found from the rings on their legs.

Cdr. N. S. Tyabji I.N. reported on the presence of 42 species of birds near Cochin harbour from December 1957 to April 1960.

Two contradictory letters about the newsletter from Dehra Dun are worth mentioning. P. D. Stracey, Honorary Secretary of Wildlife Preservation Society of India, Dehra Dun, suggested that instead of starting a new newsletter we should block a few pages in their magazine *Cheetal*, which was brought out every six months. This way, he said, our material would reach a wider public. [Stracey was the C. C. F. of Assam, author of a book on elephants and after retirement, was sent to Abyssinia, to set up their wildlife service.].

M. A. Rashid, Honorary Secretary, Wildlife Club, Dehra Dun, said, "We sincerely hope that your efforts to form an Ornithological Society will soon bear fruit. Please note that we shall be only too glad to join the same." [M. A. Rashid was later Chief Wildlife Warden of Gujarat and helped to promote the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*.].

In Memoriam: Shama Futehally (1952-2004)

Professor at the National School of Drama, Delhi, writer, critic, and translator, Shama was a passionate bird watcher, and contributed occasionally to the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. Extracts from some of these are reprinted below in honour of a true bird lover.

Birding in Kumaon

"The next day was to be dedicated to adventure. We had heard that the trek to Peenath, i.e., to the Pinakeshwar temple some distance away, was uniquely beautiful, and had collected a guide and sandwiches for the event. The trek is also a good twelve kilometres of nearly vertical climb, but our guide appears to have taken a good look at the two memsaabs who had hired him, to have sized them up unerringly, and to have left this fact for them to find out. We left early in the morning and reached the base of the mountain around eight. It was here that we had our first view of the red-billed blue magpie, that strikingly colourful denizen of the mountains. Three of these birds flew across the fields in front of us to confabulate together on the pines. Then there was the pleasant sight of a cinnamon tree sparrow, which I remember seeing on every branch during a visit to Kashmir in the seventies..."

"The day after that we drove to Binsar, which adjoins the Corbett National Park on one side and the Binsar Wildlife Sanctuary on the other. It is also one of the most beautiful places I have seen. Weighty with forest, it swirls in and out of mist, swoops into deep

ravines, disappears into cloudy mountains, and opens up to flaming sunsets. Early in the afternoon Zai and I were walking to the 'Snow Viewing Point' immediately after another of those mountain storms which threaten to end the world without further ado. We reached a small clearing where the sun was shining glassily on emerald leaves, and as we arrived it burst into life. Hundreds of small birds began to fly crazily about, apparently in demented search of the berry-like fruit of a particular tree. These turned out to be chestnut-bellied nuthatches, which I had assumed were never seen in large numbers. Interestingly enough we saw another flock of these nuthatches, behaving in much the same way, early the next morning in another spot. This, too, was after a shower. It seems to me that this would make a perfect subject of study for some eager young ornithologist." [1999. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 39 (6): 97-99.]

Revisiting Kihim

"My knowledge of, birds such as it is, is all mapped on to Kihim – ring plovers are the dots you see by a certain large patch of rocks, black bellied finch-larks are the flash of brown and black by the Kihim pond, the call of the spotted babbler is the call you hear as you walk past the third house from ours. This time I was returning after some years, and in the interim a fertiliser complex had raised an ugly head in the next village. But I discovered, with primitive relief, that my bird map was more or less unchanged and that