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Jungle Myna and Bank Myna. Too few, too many, then none at all!

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Over the past few decades whenever I happened to come by Jungle Mynas *Acridotheres fuscus* (Wagler, 1827), they were almost always in the company of the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* (Linnaeus, 1766). I had never consciously noted the numbers of the one against the other but I have carried the imprint that the Common would outnumber the Jungle Myna by about ten to one. For confirmation, I recently went back to the oldest, and the first, bird book in which Jerdon (*The birds of India*, 1863; vol. II: 329) reproduces Hodgson's observation on the Jungle Myna, "perpetually associating with *A. tristis*, every large flock of which has many individuals of this bird among them."

At this stage, I decided to make a field sample survey of the numbers of the Jungle Myna obtaining at Chandigarh (30°45'N, 70°45'E. 360m a.s.l.) vis-à-vis the Common Myna. I opted for the Zakir Rose Garden for my survey. For, on the way out and return from my daily morning walk, I traverse about 800m through it and am able to observe bird-life at random up to 30-50m all around. To give an idea of its space, it is paraded as the largest in Asia with 1,200 varieties of roses and more than 50 species of trees, most of them flowering. It is a favoured roosting and breeding site for the resident birds and it also attracts local migrants and 'passage' birds through the year-long cycle of bird movements. Here are the observations (2003).

S.No.	Date and time	Common Myna	Jungle Myna
1	21.ii: 07:55	17	4
2	22.ii: 07:30	12	2
3	23.ii: 08:15	20+	3
4	24.ii: 07:45	15+	3
5	26.ii: 07:55	20	4
6	28.ii: 08:00	30+	9
7	2.iii: 08:30	35+	2
8	5.iii: 07:30	42	2

Thus far, the above tabulation places one Jungle Myna for every seven of the Common. Now on 7th March, we boarded the train that would transport us to the bad lands of

tribal Jharkhand. At 11:30 hours when the train reached Kanpur Railway Station (80°10'N, 26°20'E), I stepped out on the platform as I hoped to see a variety of birds including the mynas. I was at once astonished because to the total exclusion of all species of birds, all I saw were hundreds upon hundreds of Bank Mynas *Acridotheres ginginianus* (Latham, 1790). Later at 16:10 hours, I was to witness exactly the same scene at Allahabad Railway Station (81°51'N, 25°30'E) with just a few House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* (Linnaeus, 1758), and Blue Rock Pigeons *Columba livia* Gmelin, 1789, thrown in. This is probably the kind of setting which had inspired Ali and Ripley (*Handbook* 1972, vol. 5: 181) to state how it particularly favoured railway stations, sauntering along confidently on the platform, in and out of passengers feet and baggage, picking up bits of food. We spent the next three weeks at Mcluskie Ganj (23°48'N, 84°56'E. 360m a.s.l.) where Bank Mynas have never been sighted but Jungle Mynas are seen occasionally. However, from 8-26 March 2003 not a single Jungle Myna was spotted during my daily fairly extensive morning walks.

The return journey was performed on 27th March. Surprise of surprises, there was no trace of any Bank Myna even as I tramped up and down the platform of Allahabad Railway Station at 10:30 hours for the next 15 minutes. At 14:40 hours the Kanpur Railway Station replicated exactly the same scene! Ali and Ripley (op. cit.) state that this Myna is "...subject to...seasonal local...movements..." In the instant case this seemed inadequate to explain the two so completely divergent observations made twenty days apart at the same spots and the same clock hours. Perhaps what I had witnessed is the sharp divide between the preferred living habitat of this myna (towns, cities, bazaars and railway stations) and its preferred breeding habitat (steep earth banks, road cuttings and banks of rivers and canals). Now Kanpur has the Ganges and the Chambal in close vicinity and the Allahabad Railway Station is virtually on the confluence of the Ganges, Jamuna and Sarswat rivers. In all probability the Bank Mynas had left their living habitat for their breeding habitat between 7 and 27 March. Mr.

Gurmeet Singh, Deputy Chief Wildlife Warden, Punjab, who studied the Bank Myna for his M.Sc. degree (1992). *The ecology of the Bank Myna (Acridotheres fuscus) in an urban environment*. University of Bombay: Bombay.), backs my inference.

On returning to Chandigarh it was not the turn of the Jungle Myna to astonish me with such vast congregations on my chosen corner in the Rose Garden where the Common Myna stood driven to near anonymity; at least for about ten days any way. Perhaps it is best to reproduce the observations I noted:

1. 28th March, 07:00 hours: Jungle Mynas are just about everywhere. On one Jacaranda tree alone, there are 54 and elsewhere in the Rose Garden I saw 5 Common Mynas only.
2. 30th March, 07:30 hours: Jungle Mynas in flocks of 10 to 50. They are so crazy over the nectar of the Bottle Brush *Callistemon lanceolatus* flowers that you could throw a butterfly net over them, almost!
3. 1st April, 08:15 hours: Jungle Mynas, no change.
4. 2nd April, 08:00 hours: 33 Jungle Mynas on a *Semal* tree *Salmalia malabarica* and 20 on a nearby Silver Oak *Grevillea robusta*. In contrast only four Common Mynas encountered.
5. 4th April, 07:30 hours: The Jungle Mynas are also attracted to the nectar of the Silver Oak flowers.
6. 7th April, 07:30 hours: Jungle Mynas still around in large numbers but beginning to form smaller congregations of 5-15 birds. The rose garden full of myna chatter.
7. 10th April, 07:30 hours: Jungle Mynas now more or less in the same numbers as Common Mynas. The return 'passage' of the Jungle Mynas may well have begun.
8. 14th April, 08:00 hours: Jungle Mynas diminishing in numbers. Blossoms on Bottle Brush and Silver Oaks have faded out.
9. 16th April, 07:30 hours: One flock of 20 Jungle Mynas.
10. 21st April, 07:00 hours: One reason why so few of the Common Mynas were visible is perhaps because the peak 'passage' of the Jungle Myna here coincides with the peak nesting activity of the Common. There is no direct evidence of the Jungle Myna nesting here. Surely there must be a few Jungle Mynas resident here. Should they not be nesting? One pair was seen exploring a nest-cavity on a *Semal* tree and another contesting a cavity with a Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*

(Scopoli, 1769). Finally one Common Myna arrived and cleared every one from the site!

11. 20th May, 08:00 hours: Since 23rd April, no Jungle Mynas have been seen at all, anywhere.

Of course no conclusions can be formed on the basis of a few observations. But what appears probable about the large but temporary influx and presence of the Jungle Myna here from about mid-March to end-April may well have a link with tree blossoms (the Bottle Brush and Silver Oak, for instance). The absence of Jungle Myna beginning about end-April, which coincides with the fading of certain tree blossoms, may also imply that there are no exceptions to Ali and Ripley's assertion about the Jungle Myna "breeding from foothills to c.2100m". As they begin breeding in March and once the biological urge sets in, off they got to the foothills and beyond. May be next year, someone will get up the Shivaliks and map out this movement. Will some reader please also check out whether the seasonal fluctuation of numbers of the Bank Myna at the Kanpur and Allahabad railway stations is related to their breeding period, March-April? I concede that it may not make ornithological waves but it will be an interesting insight.

Postscript

I had readied this article for dispatch when I hit a lucky patch with the Jungle Myna at 07:45 hours on 25th May 2003. One Jungle Myna in a blaze of a hurry landed almost at my feet, grabbed at some tid-bit and took off in a flash. Fortunately, I could follow his flight and saw him enter a cavity of a tree trunk about 20m away. It was an old, gnarled Gulmohar tree *Delonix regia*, with a large cavity about 10 inches across and five feet above the ground. But Jungle Myna parents were busy carrying food to their chicks in never-ceasing shuttles. Two very hungry gaping gullets kept bobbing up to the rim of the cavity. So there is a small permanent resident population of the Jungle Myna here and they do nest also. After all, Chandigarh is at the Shivalik foothills. On 28th May, three more active nests of the Jungle Myna were seen in the same general area.

A pair of Common Myna was nesting and happily co-existing in another cavity of the same tree about 2m up and away to a side. And three more, in cavities, in the decayed, thick whorl of a *Semal*, some 20m away.

Now at the end of this article, someone may well ask what was all this pother about? Mere myna chatter!

Sighting of Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* Linnaeus, 1758, in Sriharikota Island, Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh, India

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Two races of the Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* Linnaeus, 1758, are reported from the Indian region. *R. a. korejewi*

Zarudny, 1905, which breeds in Kashmir and Ladakh (?) and straggles as far as Madhya Pradesh; and *R. a. indicus*