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Blue-bearded Bee-eater and other birds in Kaigal, Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

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We went camping to Kaigal, with students of Rishi Valley School. This riparian forest area is owned by Krishnamurti Foundation India and is located on the Palamner-Kuppam road. The trip was short and lasted just over 27 hours on 18th-19th January, 2004. The habitat is mainly riparian with dry deciduous forests (reduced to scrub or grassy stretches on the fringes) and cultivation. During our visit there was hardly any water flowing in the stream and the only water in the vicinity was in the few deep pools.

With a group of 27 highly energetic students one rarely gets a chance to watch birds and I did not anticipate much on this trip. Yet I was able to record over 40 bird species here. One of the interesting birds seen was the Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni* (Jardine & Selby, 1828). A single bird was seen in the riparian habitat on the morning of 19th January. This species was earlier recorded in the Rishi Valley campus in 2000-2001 (Santharam 2001) and it was exciting seeing it here.

Another interesting bird identified from the calls was the Red Spur-fowl *Galloperdix spadicea* (Gmelin, 1789). At least 2-3 birds were heard calling from the forest sloping to the stream early that morning. There are reports of this bird from scrub / deciduous forests around

Madanapalle (Chittoor district) as also reports of it being hunted / captured for the pot. The other interesting birds seen were Grey Junglefowl *Gallus sonneratii* Temminck, 1813, White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus* (Scopoli, 1786), Spotted Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps* Swainson, 1832, Black-naped Monarch-flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea* (Boddaert, 1783), and White-spotted Fantail Flycatcher *Rhipidura albicollis albogularis* (Lesson, 1831).

This forest tract lies adjacent to the Kaundinya Wildlife Sanctuary, which has a small population of Asian Elephants *Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758, which seasonally migrate from Tamil Nadu. There are old records of the White-bellied Treepie *Dendrocitta leucogastra* Gould, 1833, from these forests (Ali and Ripley 1983). Perhaps a detailed survey of these forests could tell us the present status of these birds and other interesting birds that are patchily distributed outside the Western Ghats.

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Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (Gmelin, 1789) feeding on insect road kills

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On the evening of 8th September 2003 (around 16:00 hours), the weather was humid at Sriharikota Island (Andhra Pradesh). Passing patchy dark clouds gave shade intermittently. Thousands of dragonflies were flying low over the road that connects Sriharikota Island with the mainland (Sulurpet), by passing through the Pulicat Lake. Vehicular traffic is high at this hour. This caused a heavy casualty among the dragonflies. A pair of Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* (Gmelin, 1789) utilized this

opportunity for effective feeding with minimum effort. They flew slowly over the road and made swooping dives to pick up the dead dragonflies from the road.

The Gull-billed Tern is one among the five species of terns reported from Sriharikota Island and the adjoining Pulicat Lake (Rao 1998). In India, the bird breeds in northwestern parts and is distributed widely throughout the country during winter (Ali and Ripley 1987). The Gull-billed Tern is an opportunistic feeder, more insectivorous

than most other terns. Its prey includes grasshoppers, dragonflies, moths and grubs. It also takes spiders, earthworms, small reptiles and frogs, small fish, aquatic invertebrates and, rarely, voles and small birds (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). It is known that terns pick up food floating on sewage and seawater near harbours. At the same time, this observation of Gull-billed Terns feeding on insect road kills is worth documenting.

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Two additions to the Rishi Valley bird list

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The Black-naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* Linnaeus, 1766, and the Rain Quail *Coturnix coromandelica* (Gmelin, 1789), were recently seen in the campus of Rishi Valley in Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. Here are the details.

Black-naped Oriole: At least a pair was seen from 9th February to 10th April 2003 (I was away from the campus soon after). All the features that distinguish the species, namely the darker and broader eye-stripes that joined up at the nape, less of black and more of green plumage on the wings and back and the more nasal call (the birds were very vocal) were noticed. Again in the winter of 2003, the birds were seen in Rishi Valley. There was more than a pair--perhaps two--seen / heard regularly in the campus from 19th November 2003, and are still around as I write this (on 11th April 2004). Having seen this species on several earlier occasions in the Western Ghats and in the Andamans, there was no difficulty in identifying it.

The species is only "occasionally recorded...in winter...[in] Kerala and Bangladesh; resident in Andaman and Nicobar Islands; widely scattered records elsewhere..." (Grimmett *et. al.*, 1998). In Andhra Pradesh, this bird has been recorded from the eastern coastal plains (Taher and Pittie 1989) and at Anantagiri Reserve Forest in Rangareddi district (Pittie 2001). In Karnataka it was recorded by Andheria (1999) in Whitefield and Bannerghatta National Park on the outskirts of Bangalore, though not reported by Joesph George (1994).

In view of the paucity of reports from this region, this record is significant. Perhaps the bird may be a scarce but regular winter visitor in the southern peninsula but is often

overlooked due its superficial resemblance to the commoner Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* (Linnaeus, 1758).

Rain Quail: A single bird was collected in one of the hostels of the school on the night of 27th June 2003. The bird was alive with no external injuries but appeared exhausted when it was brought to me the next morning. It was docile and made no attempts to fly when examined. The bird was easily identified by the field marks - the dark breast patch and the bold streaks on the flanks were those of a male Rain Quail. It was later released in the scrub jungle and ran away into the thickets and disappeared.

This bird is widespread in peninsular India and is known to have imperfectly understood local movements (Ali and Ripley 1983). Perhaps it moves about during the monsoon.

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