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Bird news from Rishi Valley

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It is two years since I updated readers of *Indian Birds* with bird news from Rishi Valley (Santharam 2008). Much has happened in this time. Our checklist now stands at an impressive 216 species. Though all is not well with the birds at the valley—nearly 40 species (mainly waterbirds) having not been recorded here in recent years—a few species seen long back have made a comeback, and we had one surprise addition.

While it is quite understandable that several species of waterbirds, e.g., Striated Heron *Butorides striata*, Indian Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*, Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, and Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*, recorded here earlier are now no longer seen, thanks to the poor rainfall, and low water-levels at the percolation tank, and other nearby waterbodies (with a notable exception of a tank at the main road having water over the past two years continuously), what has been surprising has been the absence of sightings of some terrestrial birds that were earlier reported by others (Rangaswami & Sridhar 1993) in recent times—Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina* (of the white-throated race), Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus speciosus*, Sykes Lark *Galerida deva*, Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*, Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis*, Brown Wood-owl *Strix leptogrammica*, Jungle Owlet *Glaucidium radiatum*, Yellow-footed Green-pigeon *Treron phoenicopterus*, and Jungle

Myna *Acridotheres fuscus*, to name a few. A few raptors too have gone missing—Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*, Crested Serpent-eagle *Spilornis cheela*, and Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera*. There are a few others, like Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*, Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*, Asian Emerald Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx maculatus*, which are missing from the list, but these could have been vagrants.

Fig. 1. Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus*.



On the positive side, there have been some gains too over the last two years, including waterbirds! The Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* is one of them. Over the last 24 months the birds have not only turned up at the tank near the main road but have also bred in both years. Though the water body is quite small, I estimate that at least six pairs have established themselves here, and bred alongside Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis*. Another newcomer to Rishi Valley is the Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*: a lone bird was seen, in non-breeding plumage, in March 2009. In March 2010, a waterbird that turned up after a long gap was the Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*. A female was spotted under *Ipomoea* bushes at the tank. She gave us lovely views, through the spotting scope, for a while, and then slowly melted into the depths of the thick and dark undergrowth.

Perhaps the most spectacular comeback has been that of the Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus*. Recorded from Rishi Valley in the early 1990s, this bird had not been seen in the campus, and its immediate vicinity, with certainty, ever since. The birds could however be regularly seen in the foothills of Horsley Hills, just three kilometers or so, at the western end of the valley. In my 12 years of stay at Rishi Valley, I had, at least thrice, heard, what I presumed to be the calls of this bird, in the scrub forest habitat in the school campus, and adjacent areas. The last such occasion was on 15 March 2009 when I also noticed two birds up the hill, much beyond the scope of my binoculars. So when Mr Gnanaskandan, of Chennai photographed the bird (Fig. 1), on 7 February 2010, we were all thrilled. Subsequently the bird was seen at the same spot by students of the school and on 14 March 2010—all the birdwatchers who came along that morning had a good look through the spotting scope at the bird as it called, and moved about on the hillside. We hope the bird will stay back and breed in the campus in the years to come.

Another addition to our list is the Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*, seen in densely wooded area of the campus in March 2009 (Fig. 2).

The 'old' checklist of birds of Rishi Valley, published in Rangaswami & Sridhar (1993) contains an erroneous entry—the White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis* was included as a case of mistaken identity, it should have been the Brown-headed Barbet *M. zeylanica*, a bird commonly seen in the wooded areas of the hills surrounding the valley. However on 16 October 2009, I saw a Coppersmith Barbet *M. haemacephala* agitated over the presence of another larger barbet that was trying to peck at a hole on a subabul tree. On closer examination, this bird turned out to be a *viridis*! Fortunately I had a camera

Fig. 2. Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*.



V. Santharam

handy, and so could take a few pictures (Fig. 3). This is the first published record of this species in Andhra Pradesh. It is, of course, a common bird in Bangalore city, which is about 100 kms south-west from here.

But the most exciting find of the period were the Marshall's lora *Aegithina nigrolutea*. These birds were seen in the valley adjacent to ours, which is fairly undisturbed, and uninhabited. This area, in the past, had agricultural lands, but with failure of the rains, these lands were left fallow and slowly the vegetation is reverting to natural scrub and deciduous forests, interspersed with

Fig. 3. White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*.



V. Santharam

open areas. Apart from sheep grazing, and occasional firewood collection, most of this area is left alone. I find this stretch a most exciting place to look out for birds. The bird was first spotted on 18 January, 2009 and a female was observed among the short *Albizia amara* trees for a period of five minutes and at a close range. I could clearly make out the black tail with white tips, and also with white on the rectrices. During the period, the bird was seen feeding among the foliage, eating caterpillars from under the leaves, often hanging upside down to obtain them. The next day, I saw a pair of these birds in non-breeding plumage. One of them clearly had white tail tips. I also clearly heard the calls that sounded "wheet-tit-ti". My next sighting was on 28 January of a pair that I traced by their calls—softer version of "churrs", and contact calls sounding more like that of the Common Woodshrike's *Tephrodornis pondicerianus*, as described by Sálím Ali. I next saw the pair on 27 March, and managed to get some record pictures with a digital camera (Fig. 4). On 2 April 2010, I saw a male in the same area and have not seen the *nigrolutea* here since. The interesting thing was there were also Common loras *A. tiphia* in the same area, and on the last occasion both the species were seen close to one another. I have earlier seen Marshall's at Timbaktu collective campus (off the Bangalore-Hyderabad highway) in the Anantapur

Fig. 4. Marshall's lora *Aegithina nigrolutea*.



V. Santharam

district in August 2007, apart from sightings in Gujarat (Saurashtra, and Kachchh).

The Puff-throated Babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*, which was first noticed in the campus in the regenerated forest in 2004 has by now established itself well and can be heard regularly. The Brown Fish-owl *Ketupa zeylonensis* that used to be regularly seen, and whose young I had noticed on several occasions on our rooftops at night, has been scarcely noticed during this period of time. The Indian Eagle-owl *Bubo benghalensis* is now more often seen near the school, and I hear its calls most often at dusk, as well as dawn from the nearby hill. The Verditer Flycatcher *Eumyias thalassina* was seen often in 2008–2009 winter and this season too it was seen on several occasions. With the resumption of sugarcane cultivation (using drip irrigation), Common Rosefinches *Carpodacus erythrinus* have returned to the campus in winter months, and several dozens gather to roost in the sugarcane in the evenings along with Baya Weavers *Ploceus philippinus*, and several species of munias *Lonchura* spp. Black-naped Orioles *Oriolus chinensis* are now more regular winter visitors in the campus, often outnumbering their Indian *O. kundoo* cousin.

The presence of water in the tank near the main road has brought back Lesser Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis* after several years, and we walk the three kilometres to see them, as also other waterside birds. Congregations of swallows *Hirundo* spp. of at least three species exceeding 500 numbers are often seen on wires en route, and are an added attraction. Besides, there are always chances of seeing a Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii* in the degraded scrub.

I located a nest of the Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* on a lone tree in the locality where I had seen the Marshall's Iora (on the first day I located the latter). It was a large, overflowing nest placed atop the tree, nearly 15 m from the ground. The bird was seen collecting twigs from the ground in January 2009. I did not make any detailed study of the nest due to lack of sufficient time as also because I did not wish to disturb the birds. From a distance I discreetly observed the nest for the next six months, and invariably would see an adult sitting in the nest, and another on a nearby tree, or rock. Once I saw a White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa* attack the eagle, which was not bothered in the least. My last observation of the eagles at the nest was on 14 June 2009 when I noticed two young flying about the nest.

Among species re-sighted in the valley after several years' gap is the Grey-headed Starling *Sturnia malabarica*—a small flock seen in February 2009 in the mango orchard where the trees were flowering, and the Tickell's Leaf-warbler *Phylloscopus affinis* (Fig. 5) on 10 April 2009, and again on 14 March 2010. This latter species appears to be a passage migrant seen in March–April.

In the absence of substantial rains, it was impossible to expect a good count of waterbirds near the school. Despite this, on 11 January 2009, we made a day long survey of the wetlands only to find many of them bone-dry! Yet the day ended with a few surprises and a list of 100 species! Kandukur tank (Vyasa Raya Samudram) was the only waterbody that had good amount of water and there were over 1,200 ducks, and several other

Fig. 5. Tickell's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*.



V. Santharam

waterbirds. Eight Oriental Darters *Anhinga melanogaster* were among the birds seen here. At the Pedda Tippa Samudram (PTM), another large waterbody, there was not a drop of water, and as we scanned the dry tank bed, we located nine Indian Coursers *Cursorius coromandelicus* feeding. Though I had always hoped to see these birds near the tank over the last several trips, this was the first sighting. The birds were not too shy, with villagers walking past them within about 40–50 m, and afforded good views. The Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* pair was seen at the scrub beyond the PTM tank where I have noticed them on earlier occasions.

An interesting event that caught the attention of the students, staff, as well as visitors at the school was the Rishi Valley Bird Race, held twice so far in 2009 and 2010. I felt this created more awareness among those who took part in the half-day event (from 6.00 am to 12 noon), about the birds of the campus, and has now become a greatly anticipated event. We had over 160 participants each on both occasions, and 100, and 110 species of birds were spotted in the two years. In fact the sighting of the Yellow-throated Bulbul was made during the second Bird Race. I have plans to make the event a half-day bird survey in the coming years with each team allocated an experienced birdwatcher, and a specific area so that all localities and habitats get adequately covered. Also on the cards is a plan to launch Field Study Course in Ornithology, a four-day programme at Rishi Valley for those who have completed the Home Study Course in Ornithology. I have been trying out this with students of our school as well as sister schools at Pune at Varanasi and have had encouraging response.

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