Sighting of the Philippine Shrike *Lanius cristatus lucionensis* at Rameswaram Island, Tamil Nadu, India

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On a recent visit to Rameswaram Island (9°172N, 79°182E; SE coast of India: Tamil Nadu state) between 1st and 4th November 2007, I spotted the Philippine Shrike *Lanius cristatus lucionensis*. I located at least 8-10 solitary individuals perched on shrubs, especially *Prosopis* sp., in open areas around the following locations: Ramar Padam, Dhanushkodi, Kothanda Ramar Temple, beach front beyond Hotel Tamil Nadu and in the town, near the temple (southern road bordering the temple). The bird was easily told apart from the nominate subspecies-Brown Shrike *L. c. cristatus*-by its greyish crown and yellowish white under parts. The birds were quite vocal and their calls sounded similar to those of the nominate race.

Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) say that the Philippine Shrike is a scarce but regular winter visitor to Sri Lanka and SE coast of India. My earlier encounter with this bird had been in the South Andamans (Santharam 1997) and Srharikota Island in Andhra Pradesh where we were able to ring a bird (Mohapatra & Santharam 1992). Balachandran & Rajan (1994) felt that the Philippine Shrike might be a regular winter visitor to Point Calimere (Tamil Nadu state), where more than ten individuals were ringed during October 1991. They felt its population might equal that of the Brown Shrike. At Point Calimere, peak populations of both subspecies occurred during their autumn passage. At Rameswaram, however, I failed to come across the Brown Shrike or any other shrike species.

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Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1969)-19

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One of the great joys of editing the *Newsletter* was the pleasure of receiving fine articles by contributors who knew more about birds than the Editor, and where the editorial function was merely to change a comma into a semi-colon, if that. But a more lasting satisfaction was to have encouraged people interested in birds to take to pen. Many shied away, but some responded, and to them I always related the story of the poet, apocryphal though it may have been that he didn't know what to write. "Fool," said his Muse to him, " look into thy heart and write." In some such way the best pieces in the *Newsletter* were not necessarily from competent ornithologists but from amateurs who put their feelings into words.

In the previous issue I carried extensive extracts from an article by S. K. Reeves published in July 1969. I had decided not to hurry, and attempt to give the reader a better feel of the area and the subject, rather than just a short extract which would be only of historical interest. Now I go a step further, by going a step backwards and reproducing an article published in April 1969 by K. S. R. Krishna Raju. I am sure you will enjoy it.

Birdwatching around Visakhapatnam

"On 20 September 1968, I went on holiday to my native-place, Alamanda R.S., a village in the Visakhapatnam district of

Andhra Pradesh. The southwest monsoon had failed, and the scene from the bus was largely one of dying vegetation. Here and there by the side of the road the water-holes still had a little water in them, and would usually have contained some meditative egrets and herons, but I saw nothing on this occasion. Lack of rains had deprived them of food; and even without such a natural hazard, their numbers are rapidly diminishing. Unless preventive measures are taken quickly against the indiscriminate use of poisons like endrine, and of shot guns, such birds as herons, egrets, and also doves, which appear to be the most conspicuous casualties, will become scarcer and scarcer.

"The area around my native-place comprises both wet and dry lands, more or less dependent on the monsoon, surrounded by low hills with light scrub as well as the denser foliage of mango gardens and palm groves. This mixed vegetation is a suitable home for numerous species of birds and other small animals like porcupines, jackals, hares, and wild boar, it is indeed a paradise for the birdwatcher. The day after my arrival, at about four in the afternoon,

I went for a walk in a mango grove with my cousin. The first thing that attracted our attention were the shrill calls of Redvented Bulbuls that were hopping from tree to tree. The flock consisted of both young and adults, I counted 23 of them. With them were Common Mynas, but no Redwhiskered Bulbuls. On an acacia tree we saw a single White browed Bulbul. Just then a tiny little black bird caught our eye, with a white patch on its wing conspicuous in flight. This was a male Indian Robin. A few seconds later, the ashy brown hen, with no white wing patch, appeared on the scene.

We went farther in to the middle of the mango garden and were at once surrounded by a varied multitude of birds – munias, minivets, sunbirds, babblers, parakeets and flowerpeckers. Of these the most numerous were Scarlet Minivets, Small Minivets and Tickell's Flowerpeckers, the minivets dominating the scene with their brilliant plumage and calls. Jungle and Common Babblers were the babblers most in evidence, though we saw one or two of the yellow-eyed species too. Purple-rumped Sunbirds, Blackheaded Munias and Spotted Munias were also about, in strength. All these birds formed a single flock, enjoying each other's company. What a harmonious life they seem to lead. Even though they belong to different species there appears to be no caste and creed barriers between them, as there are amongst human beings. There seem to be no political or other petty quarrels in the avian kingdom. As Wordsworth says, 'Let nature be your teacher', and obviously man has yet to learn many things from nature, especially the art of peaceful co-existence.

"A few minutes later we came across a flock of Roseringed Parakeets. Alexandrine or Large Indian Parakeets were also to be seen, but in fewer numbers. On one mango tree we saw a couple of Goldenbacked Woodpeckers pecking for insects on the lower branches. Both of them were females, having the characteristic all black fore crown stippled with white. Coming out of the grove, we saw on some telegraph wires a pair of Spotted Doves. Even in the middle of Visakhapatnam, with all its hustle and bustle, they are to be seen in the trees, sending forth their curious calls as if to draw themselves to the attention of the public. There is a legend that if one of a pair of Spotted Doves is shot dead, the other bird will never pair with a new mate. We cannot verify this legend, but should not be surprised if it were true and that these birds do possess such a moral sense.

"Next, on a banyan tree, we saw three pairs of Koels along with a silent Brainfever Bird and two Golden Orioles.

"Now I shall conclude with some miscellaneous observations of mine made at various times and places in Visakhapatnam district that may be of interest.

"In the village of Alamanda I have noticed a couple of Green Bee-eaters and a Roller which curiously enough each alighted on the same perch and at the same times for four days running. The Bee-eaters arrived punctually at 3.45 p.m. and the Roller at 4.10. Emerging from the mango grove from the same direction they perched at the same spot on some wires for few minutes and flew back into the garden. This exactly repeated routine may have been a mere coincidence, and the birds may not have been the same individuals, but if so it is remarkable.

"I have been disappointed to see that Jerdon's Chloropsis, once common enough, has almost disappeared from the region during the lat two years. The local people catapult them and make them into cage birds. I have only seen one recently: on 20 October 1968, in the outskirts of the village of Bheemali in a solitary mango tree, along with Whitebellied Drongos and Scimitar Babblers.

"One of the *konda doras* (hill-tribesmen) in Chittivanipalem, a village on the Eastern Ghats in S. Kota taluk, told me last year that he shot a Peafowl while it was incubating its eggs. Out of curiosity, I asked him about the incubation being done by a male bird, instead of the hen. In reply he said that he was very confident that it was a male that he had shot, and that it was on a nest with 4 eggs. I can only take his word for it but it requires some more authentic report to test the veracity of this fact.

"On a sunny morning, I noticed a solitary Black Drongo applying red ants to its body, beneath the wings. It had picked up 5-6 ants and carefully attached them to its body. After leaving them a few minutes, it started picking them off and eating them. Probably the idea was to use its prey to get rid of lice and other parasites before feeding on it.

"More recently, on 25 October in Visakhapatnam, I observed the strange phenomenon of copulation in a pair of House Sparrows. It was rainy day and a few minutes after the rain a pair of them landed on a parapet wall. The female birds was shaking terribly; at once the male bird climbed onto her and for a few seconds copulated with her and then got down and hopped a few paces, calling softly. But the female bird remained standing where she was, rooted to the spot, still shivering. The male bird again crouched on the hen's back, turning his tail downwards while the hen raised here. Each time they took exactly 5-6 seconds, and after an interval of 5 seconds, repeated the same process. In this way they copulated nine times, till the female stopped shivering.

"Other birds I have seen on trips to different parts of Visakhapatnam district include pied and Whitebreasted Kingfishers, House and Palm Swifts, Common and Greyheaded Mynas (the Hills Myna is reported to occur in the ghat regions of the district), Large Cuckoo-Shrikes, Hoopoes, Grey Hornbills, Skylarks, Ring Doves, White backed and King Vultures, Spotted Owlets, Red-wattled Lapwings, Grey Partridges, Bustard-Quail, Coucals, Lorikeets and Crimsonbreasted Barbets. Finally, I must not forget the crows and the Little Grebe that is always such a pleasure to watch as it suddenly disappears into the water, leaving a series of shallow rings on the surface of the water.

"The observations will, I trust, give our readers a glimpse of the avifauna of Visakhapatnam district."