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Postcard from Sri Lanka—birding during a pandemic

As I sit in the balcony of our colonial-style bungalow in Sri Lanka, the COVID-19 pandemic rages across the globe. Apart from its unspeakable death toll, the misery caused to local people by the widespread lockdowns is depressing. Yet, I count my blessings. Here I am in a comfortable house at the end of a winding wooded lane, perched atop a cliff overlooking the clear blue Indian Ocean. I have a stocked pantry, Internet access, and above all, I am surrounded by abundant birdlife. What more can I ask for, given the dreary circumstances?

I came to Matara, Sri Lanka, in early February 2020, as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar to the University of Ruhuna. My mission was to teach the science of climate change to students and lay audiences, to promote birding as a way to connect with nature, and highlight career and higher education opportunities at my home institution, the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith. After seven weeks of bliss, our world was turned upside down by the pandemic. For the first time in its storied 70-year history, the Fulbright Program got suspended worldwide. We were strongly urged to return home for fear of us getting stuck abroad without return flights. But given the deteriorating health situation in the USA and the relatively stable situation in Sri Lanka, my wife and I decided to stay put. Months into the lockdowns here, and across the globe, and with air travel suspended, a clear end to the pandemic is nowhere in sight. We are voluntarily stuck in Sri Lanka.

I have always told students in my ornithology classes that if they get into birding, there will be no boredom in their lives, since birds are everywhere. So, faced with an indefinite house confinement, I resorted to a blitz of balcony birding. The monthly challenges announced by eBird, to submit yard lists, Big Day lists, and one-location lists, plus the Avurudu Bird Count spear-headed annually (to celebrate the song season of *Kohas*—Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopaceus*) by the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka, were added incentives. With 214 eBird checklists to date, reporting 82 species, my yard shows one of the highest tallies in the country for this time period.

Sri Lanka is a mecca for birders, with over 500 bird species, including about 30 endemics, a warm and hospitable people, and world-class yet affordable hotels. While the pandemic has shattered my dreams of scouring the country for birds,

especially the endemics-rich central highlands, I manage to get some decent birding done every day from my easy chair in the balcony.

I was initially struck by the similarity of Sri Lanka's birds with their counterparts in southern India. After all, about 10,000 years ago, Sri Lanka was contiguous with southern India. Rising sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age isolated and made it an island. The birdlife here, in southern Sri Lanka, is similar to that of the plains of Tamil Nadu, but some birds are noticeably darker. House Crows *Corvus splendens* have less contrast between the grey neck and darker body; White-bellied Drongos *Dicrurus caeruleus* are just white-vented; the coffee brown colour of Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* appears like a darker roast; and Yellow-billed Babblers *Turdoides affinis* seem to have a dirtier head. Some birds sound a little different too. White-browed bulbuls *Pycnonotus luteolus* have less explosive whistles.

From our 37 m high balcony, I have a commanding view of a verdant coconut and jackfruit tree-filled valley, and beyond that, the clear blue Indian Ocean. On both sides of the balcony are towering trees whose canopies are at eye-level. Every morning these days, I am treated with spectacular aerial displays of the ubiquitous Green Imperial Pigeons *Ducula aenea*. Occasionally, while they are at it, they even clap their wings audibly, above their bodies, apparently in an attempt to gain their partner's attention. Having a panoramic vista means you get views (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67706304>) seldom seen from the ground. Swifts and swallows fly under you or at eye level, often dashing by within touching distance. I capture Mp3 sounds with my little Olympus WS-853 voice recorder that I may not easily get from ground. The audio of the endemic Sri Lanka Swallow *Cecropis hyperythra* from my balcony is the only one in eBird's audio database (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67712315>). The soft chattering of endemic Sri Lankan Grey Hornbills *Ocyeros gingalensis*, as they courted and copulated at eye level on coconut trees (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67772285>), and the Lesser Yellownappe's *Picus chlorolopus* oddly raptor-like scream (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S67061973>), are two of my 69 audio uploads from Sri Lanka, augmenting my small and growing collection of bird sounds.

All the seven island endemics in my yard have close relatives in southern India. The Red-backed Flameback *Dinopium psarodes* is a recent split from the Black-rumped *D. benghalense*. Despite the striking difference in appearance, it sounds the same. Similarly, the Black-capped Bulbul *Rubigula melanicterus* too is a recent split from the southern Indian Flame-throated Bulbul *R. gularis*. Sri Lankan Swallows have all-red underparts, unlike their closely related Red-rumped Swallows *C. daurica*. Sri Lankan Grey Hornbills look so stately compared to their counterparts, the Malabar Gray Hornbills *O. griseus* of the Western Ghats that it's a wonder they were once lumped. The Sri Lanka Hanging Parrot *Loriculus beryllinus* sounds and behaves exactly like the Vernal Hanging Parrot *Loriculus vernalis* of India, but getting to see its red forehead is a challenge because it always seems to be in a great hurry. The staccato call of the Crimson-fronted Barbet *Psilopogon rubricapillus* is reminiscent of a Coppersmith *P. haemacephalus*

on steroids. The Sri Lanka Green Pigeon *Treron pompadora* is a new split from the Pompadour pigeon complex.

The death toll worldwide nears 600,000. It is hard to shake away the blanket of sadness. During nights when I lie awake thinking of my son in faraway Arkansas, or the prospect of being stranded indefinitely in a foreign land, I try to think of one of the great birding moments I have had lately, and keep my mind on it till I fall asleep. Often this strategy works. One night it was a magnificent White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* soaring over my balcony with a snake-like eel in its talons, harassed by crows and drongos; another, it was that beautiful White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* drifting like a fairy over the ocean. Birding helps me get through these dark days. This hobby-turned-profession has brought me joy for four decades, but for the first time, I realize its truly therapeutic value. For that, I am grateful to the birds around us.

–Ragupathy Kannan

Letter to the Editor

Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* in Darjeeling Hills, Eastern Himalaya, and Broom-grass harvesting practices

Thapa et al. (2020) compiled high elevation records of the Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* from the Himalayas and the Western Ghats, highlighting the impact of climate change and human disturbance as drivers for the upward altitudinal migration of the species. We would like to add two additional altitudinal records from the Darjeeling Hills, Eastern Himalayas, and present a perception related to broom-grass *Thysanolaena maxima* harvesting practices.

On 14 April 2017, at 1630 h, Aditya Pradhan sighted two female Indian Peafowl perching on a *Macaranga* tree (27.04°N, 88.36°E; c.1,600 m asl), in Takdah Cantonment, Darjeeling; and on 24 March 2019, at 1102 h, Sachin Tamang sighted one male Indian Peafowl in Bagora (26.93°N, 88.33°E; c.2,200 m asl), Darjeeling.

Our interactions with the local community, on both occasions, revealed that the local lowland habitat of the species overlaps with the broom-grass cultivation areas. After the broom-grass is harvested in March-April, the fields are set on fire to maximize yield for the next season. The local community members suggested that this might be one of the reasons for the temporary upward migration of Indian Peafowl. We are grateful to them for sharing their insights and local knowledge. However, further observations are needed to validate this perception.

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