

Birding in and around Kodaikanal (Ca. May 15 - June 15) by T.V. Narayana

Pride of place in any discussion of Kodaikanal birds must be given to the Palni white-breasted laughing-thrush. It is remarkable that a laughing thrush has become so 'tame and confiding' (Salim Ali) whereas the laughing thrushes in general are great skulkers, difficult to observe and are also scarce due to destruction of their habitat. The Palni laughing thrush can easily be seen even in the gardens of Kodi, sporting a white breast and rufous underparts. But it is the white eyebrows outlined by black lines that render him conspicuous, giving a small flock the air of a group of old but jaunty professors, with slaty brown caps not fully covering their white locks which protrude on either side of their heads. If the Tamil Nadu Government creates a national park in the still magnificent Palni hills, it would be most appropriate to choose this laughing thrush as its symbol; in my own mind it is already 'The Kodi Bird'.

An amusing incident involving the Kodi bird is perhaps worth recounting. In the centre of town, when I was about 100 feet or so from Spencers, I noticed two young ladies at the gate of Spencers apparently watching a small flock of birds in the opposite compound. What made it difficult to decide whether they were birding or not, was that they did not have a pair of binoculars! Intrigued by such evident devotion to birding, sans binoculars, I mentally noted that the birds involved were my Kodi birds and sauntered along very slowly until I passed them. The young ladies called me and requested me to identify the birds they saw; much to my astonishment, I had forgotten the correct name of my Kodi bird and replied it was one of the common species, a bulbul or a babbler. While they agreed it was common, they were certain it was neither a babbler nor a bulbul. So if Gowri and Sita are reading this column, they should know what the bird was. I have also left my binoculars in Kodi which can be borrowed by enthusiastic birders by just contacting me.

The commonest bird in Kodi and one which attracts attention to itself with its occasional loud screeches is the jungle myna. While it is true house crows and domestic sparrows are not established in Kodi as they are - alas - in the rest of India, I have seen two small flocks of the unmentionable sparrow totalling 7 to 8 individuals. Reliable observers have informed me of the house crow's presence this summer near the reservoir and occasionally flying across the lake. It is possible that the jungle myna, by occupying some of the suitable niches of the sparrow, prevents it from breeding prolifically in Kodi; it is puzzling however, that the house crow was nearly absent throughout my stay, while the jungle crow was nearly always present during my walks in and around town. The house crow is present and 'abundantly' visible at Oothu halfway down the ghat

road. Kodi represents the unique place in India where human habitation and the house crow do not go together!

A morning stroll on Coaker's walk reveals many common birds, including the red-whiskered and redvented bulbuls which seem so well adapted to *lantana*, that scourage of India's beautiful and wild places. Since Bryant Park with its trees is not far off, one usually sees and hears the black bulbul also during these walks. It has red legs and a red beak which it is possible to confuse with the orange bill of the black bird (yes, the same species but different race of the bird in the English nursery rhyme); the latter does not have a notched tail and is a bird found on or near the ground or in the lower branches of trees, while the black bulbul is a bird of the tree-tops.

If you can stop looking down at the magnificent vista beneath you at Coaker's walk and look up during your morning walk, you will usually notice swifts. The most abundant are the edible-nest swiftlets, recognised easily by their spells of fluttering like a bat between soaring in the usual way. They are also seen flying over the lake on a sunny day. Their regular presence suggests that they roost not far away and this was confirmed by some young friends interested in rock climbing, who reported to me that they nest (roost) in devil's kitchen. When we visited pillar rocks, we saw them fly in and out of the devil's kitchen itself; but not having ventured into the cave, I cannot say whether they nest there. A larger swift, with its unmistakable white belly, was seen clearly, but only once; this is *Apus Melba*, the Alpine swift. Another swift, the same size as the Alpine, the brown-throated spintail was glimpsed, without binoculars, when this species was flying just above the hospital. The Nilgiri swallow, which has a remarkable distribution from Java to Tahiti in the Pacific (*Hirundo Pacifica* or *Javanica*) can also be seen in various places in Kodi, including a pair once by the Packia Deepam Restaurant! The Nilgiri Pipit was also seen from Coaker's walk, with its pale rufous eyebrow and no conspicuous white in its tail. As Ali and Ripley point out, some individuals have their outer tail feathers buffish and not the usual white as in most pipits. The Kodi bird, the Nilgiri verditer flycatcher and this pipit are found only in S.W. India; so I was satisfied in having seen all three in town.

If it were not for its small size and very soft calls which render it inconspicuous, the Nilgiri white-eye would swamp all other species in the Palni hills. These greenish birds with yellow bibs and white 'spectacles' were found in most habitats - gardens, orchards, sholas with thick forest, etc. Among the sixty-odd white-eye species of the world, India has one, Ceylon a different one and Australia only two. But the small island of Lifu off New Caledonia in the Pacific has three species: (of which I was lucky to see two).

Far less abundant, but easily seen is the pied bush-chat which is dimorphic i.e. the female of the species is strikingly different from the male. While Ali notes that the rufous turtle dove occurs in the Palnis, the rather complete museum list of all birds of the Palnis lists only the Indian spotted dove and not the rufous turtle dove. I also missed in the excellent museum list the Nilgiri flower-pecker, again endemic to the region, a tiny bird distinguished by its black and not flesh-coloured bill. A comic character with a loud chip and rapidly fluttering wings to compensate for its size, he is most easily located by carefully examining the loranthus clump of trees. Indeed once the tree, in which he is, is located from his loud chip you can concentrate on a convenient loranthus clump and he is more likely than not to visit your clump. The Nilgiri verditer flycatcher, which is all blue with a white spot on the rump, and the rufous-backed shrike, a typical masked shrike sitting on telephone wires and other prominent spots, complete the list of small birds seen around town.

The large birds of prey I describe were actually seen most often in town, although the same eagles could and did turn up at much lower levels in the Palnis also. Throughout my stay I was delighted to see for fairly long periods and at close quarters the crested serpent-eagle (*Spilornis Cheela*). For even longer periods and practically every day I heard the ke-klee..... er of *Spilornis Cheela*, which is one of the great sounds of India. To me, it is as thrilling as the call of the African fish eagle (*C. Vocifer*) or even that of the Hadada ibis, which according to Williams, is one of the great sounds of Africa. It was an exhilarating experience to see three crested serpent-eagles simultaneously soaring above Kodi towards Perumal (Malai), and surely more Indians deserve to hear this call of freedom, which has unfortunately been muted in so many places. The serpent-eagles and crested honey-buzzards I encountered were often perched on trees in a wooded part of town, almost at the height of Kurunji Andavar temple. The eagles were also seen over the lake, just as the occasional black kite flew over the bazaar. The latter's notched tail clearly separates it from all other hawks and eagles.

The crested honey-buzzard is extremely variable and is difficult to identify at a casual glance. We located them (the 'we' includes two youngsters who admired my *Spilornis*) in a grove of conifers. While one flew around from tree to tree with a semicircular object of the size of a half pineapple slice (but looking like a bright chappati) clutched in its talons, and other alighted on a branch with a lizard in its beak. For 10 seconds or so they sat side by side on a branch and it was remarkable to see the differences between them - perhaps a mother and a young male. The older bird closely resembled the mounted honey buzzard in the museum at Shembaganur, and so my identification was complete. The curator described how, in the olden days when a lot more wild bees nested

around Kodi, it was not unusual to see a dozen of these magnificent birds in one day.

Part II consists of birding around Kodi, from the Coolie Ghat Road at Shembag and Tiger Shola, which are a few hundred metres below Kodi, to a plantation beside an original forest tract, nearly 1500 metres below. The lake at Kodi is at 2200 metres.
