

Birding Around Kodi: A tract of climax forest: Part II: by T.V. Narayana

Walks along the magnificent sholas around Kodi or on the Coolie Ghat road will add many more birds to your list, remembering that the best time for birding is in the early morning. Not having a car at my disposal, many exciting localities such as the lower Palnis, were beyond my reach; I was restricted to forays along the ghat road from where I could easily catch a bus or hitch a ride on a lorry to return after birding to Kodi. Naturally, some of the birds described in Part I like black bulbuls, white-eyes and other species were also seen in the sholas; conversely, certain species (e.g. the black-and-orange fly-catcher, yellow-cheeked tit and the ubiquitous small green barbets) were also seen in town.

The yellow browed bulbul, which is yellow all over but brighter yellow below, moves about in small flocks and is easily located by its double whistling call. Another species, essentially restricted to the peninsula (white the yellow-browed bulbul occurs in Ceylon and the West of the peninsula), but famous for its whistling song is the Malabar whistling-thrush or 'whistling schoolboy'. The beautiful blue bird, which appears almost black at a distance, is seen to have patches of a more brilliant blue on its shoulder and forehead. However, its handsome appearance is less remarkable than its ethereal song. It is a delightful, virtuoso performance that dominates the sound of

rushing torrents, and appears to emanate from and fill the very heavens. Having seen, but not heard, the Himalayan whistling-thrush, which belongs to the same genus as the whistling schoolboy, I am unable to compare their songs. With luck you might see - and will surely hear from this point - the famed songster sitting on the parapet of Tiger Shola near a stone-post marked 6. But if you intend to search for him away from the road, you should be equipped with knee-high boots against leeches.

A trio of flycatchers, the black-and-orange, the white-bellied blue, and the grey-headed next merit attention. The first, which is extremely handsome and unmistakable for any other bird, is endemic to the ghat regions of S India. Ali describes its distribution as 'local and patchy'; it is not particularly afraid of man, like the other flycatchers, and can be observed at leisure. But for the fact that it is a denizen of fairly dense undergrowth where the sun's rays do not set off its striking livery, I would feel inclined to compare its beauty with even that of the orange minivet. The latter, a bird of the tree tops, is visible to the naked eye, under suitable conditions, at least a quarter of mile away. When illuminated by the glorious morning sun, this race of the scarlet minivet leaves an unforgettable impression with its burnished orange and (relatively less) black of its plumage.

Only a careless birdwatcher would confuse the white-bellied blue flycatcher with the verditer in full adult plumage. Apart from the white belly, the bluer 'horns' or patch on the forehead of the former set it apart immediately from the latter. Its illustration in Ali and Ripley's monumental 10 volume work brings this out clearly. It is one of the interesting species distributed in the W. Ghats of India, but not Ceylon, and from Burma on eastwards. The grey-headed flycatcher is more continuous in its distribution, occurs also in Ceylon and throughout the Himalayas and suitable portions of India to Indochina and Indonesia. It is notable as the harbinger of the famous mixed flocks of several species which occur in the tropical forests the world over. In Tiger Shola it had a pleasant song which I can only render as 'Take more bottles'; perhaps the solemn call of the Indian Cuckoo in the Nepal terai 'One more bottle' (or cross-word puzzle) heard a couple of weeks before, was still in my mind. Both in the terai and the Palnis around Oothu I heard the famous 'Brain-fever' call; the bird in the Palnis should be the common hawk-cuckoo, (as the large does not occur in the Shembag Museum list). Thus the delightful warnings heard from the same spot in the terai - of 'one more bottle' and 'brain-fever' - did not have their Palni counterpart, as I was unsuccessful in locating the grey-headed flycatcher below Oothu on the ghat road.

To return to the mixed flocks so often associated with the last-named bird, they contained - apart from the everpresent white-eyes - the Nilgiri flowerpecker, the yellow cheeked tit, the velvet-fronted nuthatch and on one glorious occasion, the small sunbird. Surprisingly

I did not meet the grey tit (*Parus major*) or perhaps overlooked this familiar species in the mixed flocks; but his yellow-cheeked cognate was met from nearly 2300 meters to below 1000 meters. One nuthatch, on a horizontal branch in a mixed flock, hammered at a moth or other insect almost in woodpecker fashion. As for the small sunbird, restricted to the Palnis, Nilgiris and Ceylon, I had one incomplete view of him at Sim's Park in Coonoor over a decade ago. Having spent a considerable number of hours, among the parks and gardens of Kodi without seeing him, I now met a non-breeding male. He obligingly fluttered before a clump of wild flowers in Tiger Shola revealing every field mark and the iridescent rump. Not only did I feel entirely compensated for my long wait but my elation also makes me offer the following Burns' stanza in his honour:

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| The flaunting flow'rs our gardens yield, | |
| Barbed-wire fences now must shield, | (from cows) |
| But thou seekest the random bield, | (shelter) |
| Of flowers by stane; | (stone of shola) |
| Far, far from every furrowed field, | |
| Unseen, alane! | (alone) |

(The homely doric is translated beside the verse itself, where an occasional comment is also inserted).

Halfway down the ghat road at the level of Oothu, the stands of eucalyptus are over and plantations begin. On a lucky day we saw both the crested hawk-eagle and larger goldenback woodpecker, in practically neighbouring trees. The hawk-eagle, which was distracted by protests from a tree-pie only 6 feet away from it, gave us a splendid view of the chocolate and black streaks on its white underparts. Its identification was clinched by the long crest of a few black feathers behind its head. The larger goldenback differs from the very common goldenback woodpecker of the plains and foothills by having a crimson instead of black rump, and being larger and heavier. The grackle myna and the dainty Indian lorikeet can be seen at Oothu, as well as more familiar birds like the coppersmith barbet, scarlet minivets etc. Dr. Riesz of Madurai college, the congenial and knowledgeable spirit of birding in these parts, has seen hornbills and spurfowls at this level, the latter sometimes being captured by the residents of the area. The crow-pheasant is also common both above and below Oothu, although I have not seen it in Kodi.

While birding on the Pannaikadu road above Oothu, I had the good fortune to meet planter SB, who kindly offered to take me through his plantation and adjoining forest below Oothu. As such an opportunity might not arise again, I postponed my ascent of Perumal and decided to visit his plantation and forest. Since the plantation was at a low altitude relatively, it assured some intermingling of birds of plains and hills. Without listing all plains birds, I noted both small and scarlet minivets and purple sunbirds in winter plumage (or could they be purple-rumped sunbirds as suggested by the Shembag list?). Among the more exciting finds were

a Besra sparrow-hawk and the delightful lorikeets. I did not notice the diagnostic streaks or stripes on the face and neck of the Besra. But I am quite familiar with the shikra, and both from habitat and certain obvious differences I concluded it must be a Besra. I showed to planter SB the beautiful lorikeets swaying and conversing on small branches in a tamarind tree while searching for nectar - sometimes upside down - in the blossoms. He was so delighted with them that he promised to be a good conservationist. Never allow that magnificent forest tract by your plantation to be cut down, SB'.

I was also thrilled by seeing a male black-headed cuckoo-shrike which is rare in summer in the Palnis, as well as the 'arabic-speaking' blue-winged parakeet (read Ali and Ripley for the delightful story of the Bababudan parrot). To familiarise myself with these birds, I arose early and found myself by 7.15 a.m. at my forest tract at the very next opportunity. What at first appeared like black bulbuls in the treetops, turned out to be grey drongos! It is difficult to describe one's emotions in a virgin tract undisturbed for thousands of years and slowly my sense of proportion regarding birds size got adjusted to the splendid sunlit heights. Yellow-browed bulbuls were calling incessantly, but looked the size of sparrows. Far above on the left was the hammering of a woodpecker, reminding me of a machine-gun. But the Malabar great black woodpecker, who probably was the author of the drumming, remained invisible. Grackle mynas and the whistling schoolboy were seen again, but my careful search for the trogon was a failure. However, bronzed drongos were sighted at the edge of the forest and a large racket-tailed drongo settled high up in the sunlit foliage, affording a perfect view. As I watched the flight of this splendid bird, whose rackets were just visible as two bumblebees pursuing it, I felt I had stepped into the great shoes of the young Salim Ali himself! I hope to return to this tract and chronicle the tale of its avian residents, including many skulkers, at a latter date.
