

**BIRDS OF PETUPARAI, KODAIKANAL.** *Arthur Steele*

Coming to live on a small coffee estate in the Palanis has given me an opportunity to observe the habits and antics of the avifauna, both resident and migrant. The estate is situated about 20 km from Kodaikanal and is at an elevation of about 4000 ft. The general area consists mostly of coffee plantations, grasslands and a few small patches of Shola.

Among the many resident birds is the Spotted Babbler. A shy sort of bird of rather sober appearance, dressed in olive brown with a rusty reddish crown and mottled front somewhat resembling a portly gentleman in an olive brown suit with a spotted waist coat and a faded red cap. Hopping about under the coffee bushes, turning over the fallen leaves in search of insects.

Once accustomed to my presence and finding itself unmolested by the dogs, it grows bold enough to enter the house in search of string and twine, which it then triumphantly bears away, often going to the extent of hopping up on my bed to pull at the ends of the blanket. Paying for any bits and pieces it picks up by sitting on the dry branch of an orange tree in front of the house in the evenings and treating me to its full repertoire of calls - musical bubbling whistles and trills - which have the quality of a composition by Chopin and lasting up to 15 minutes or so.

Another set of permanent residents is a pair of Magpie Robins who have brought up two lots of young since I've come to live here. These birds in their neat black and white plumage are the bandits of the area, often robbing a juicy insect from the Spotted Grey Creeper as it runs around the trunks of the trees in its nervous agitated manner. I once saw retribution for this behaviour - after taking a large green grasshopper from a Common Babbler, the Robin flew to a papaya tree where he tried to perch on a dry leaf stalk, which promptly dropped to the ground, bearing with it a most astonished looking bird, clinging on desperately as though unable to believe what was happening. When branch, bird and grasshopper hit the ground, the bird was so ruffled he let go of the grasshopper, which took wing only to be snapped up by a Drongo lurking nearby. The whole episode having the effect of a slickly rehearsed slapstick comedy including the expression of wounded dignity the Magpie Robin had as he flew off.