



The Birds of the Kaveri valley

by

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Birdwatching can become quite an addiction. One can reach the point where a regular shot of 'birding' is a necessity, and life seems unbearably dull without this almost mystical delight of the sight of flashing feather and the richly varied sound of bird-song. Birdwatching is actually a misnomer for the satisfaction of visually identifying a species - and learning more of its life-habits through repeated sightings - and is certainly equaled by listening to bird calls and bird-song. Indeed, it will often be the case that a bird is identified by its call first, then seen and watched through the glasses. Binoculars are a must; what is to the naked eye a grey blur, turns, perhaps, into a miracle of blue-sheen and russet-gold. Even with glasses there are times of frustration. A bird, perhaps a whole flock, calls away vigorously in a nearby tree, and we see not one flicking feather. This is typical especially of the early days of birdwatching. Gradually we discover how to cope with shy skulkers.

I limit this account of our birdwatching (my wife is equally obsessed) to a short stretch of the Kaveri river, especially Galiborai, some 5 miles upstream from Sangam, where we've camped several times over the past 7 years. I will not attempt to be exhaustive, as, to date we've seen some 127 species in or near the Kaveri Valley. To write of all 127 would result in a mere listing of species. So I'll be selective and concentrate on those we find specially attractive.

On the plateau above the valley there are a few birds not seen beside the river that I'll briefly mention. There are some interesting birds of prey: the strikingly coloured Red-headed Merlin is sometimes found, pigeon-sized but streamlined for diving and attacking the smallish birds (even doves at times) and animals on which it preys. With its reddish-brown head and its black-on-white moustache, its slate blue-back and wings, tipped with black, and its cross-striped (again dark grey on white) underparts, it's a fine looking falcon. I'm equally impressed by the slightly bigger Blackwinged Kite, and just in September we saw three of them gliding low across the valley, gleaming like silver in the late evening sunlight. Clear white underparts contrast with the

grey above, marked with black patches on shoulders and wing-tips. For the most systematic quartering of the countryside there's the occasional Harrier, Pale and Montagu's, to be seen, with those superb swept-back wings.

What other birds of prey are there down in the valley ? At Galiborai from time to time we see one of the most impressive hunters of all-the Osprey. Very dark-brown above, its white belly and crown, with black eye-stripes, makes a splendid sight as it waits on a prominent branch overlooking the river, then moving out across the water, dives down, sometimes fully immersing itself in the water, to seize a fish of up to may be 4 to 5 lbs. With its strong talons, lift-off is sometimes a problem, and birds have been known to drown, unable or unwilling to release their too heavy prey. The Grey-headed fishing eagle is also a valley hunter, usually further upstream where the river is wider.

Another fascinating fish hunter is the Darter, aptly so-called as it impales it prey with its sharp beak on the end of a neck like a coiled spring, deep in the water sometimes in quite fast moving streams. Another equally apt name for it is the snake-bird, as it swims with its body under the waterline and neck/head move along to and fro just like the movement of a cobra about to strike, Its flight is somewhat clumsy, but how pleasing to see them gliding along over the water, probably from the Ranganthittu colony. Then there's a less aggressive hunter, the Brown Fish-Owl, seen plunging from one tree to another to escape the mobbing of small birds, or sitting motionless on a branch, its ears usually a bit drooped, looking as mournful as its call, a low and eerie '*moom-moom*', that carries surprisingly far. The Brahminy Kite too feeds off fish, picking up the occasional dead fish from the surface. And recently I saw a White-backed Vulture (they nest in the taller trees along the river) flying overhead with a *mahseer* of perhaps 5 pounds, its orange fin still gleaming brightly.

Back to the more aggressive hunters: there's the fierce looking Crested Hawk-Eagle, sometimes to be seen watching for likely prey from the fork of a tree. Walking along the forest road once a screaming Spurfowl flashed above us a mere 6 feet, followed determinedly by a Crested Hawk-Eagle. Almost immediately after, the Spurfowl lost some of its panic and dived down into the undergrowth, safe from harm. Another incident probably involved a Shaheen Falcon. While drinking mid-morning tea, there was a sudden wild *wooshing* of wings, then a '*crump*' and just beyond the trees a flurry of feathers of what looked like a Little Brown Dove. The killer was not seen well enough to give a definite identification.

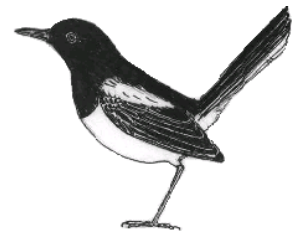


For a few days in February each year we see a rare visitor to India, the splendidly multi-colored European Bee-eater, bigger in body than any of its Indian cousins (the Green and the Chestnut-headed are found at Galiborai), and more exotically coloured, with yellows, browns, greens and splashed all over its back. Coming down the road that drops into the Sangam valley, tiny, gentle, scurrying Little Button and Jungle Bush Quail can be seen, and quite possibly a Grey Partridge or two, if we arrive as morning breaks. Despite being hunted by various kinds of two-legged hunters (and a few with 4 legs), and in spite of the serious depletion of tree cover all along this valley (even more so on the badly eroded hillsides), there are still a few Grey-Junglefowl left and may well be crossing the track in

the dawn light. 'Grey' is far from aptly descriptive of this splendid bird, the cock being especially colourful with the rich golden spangled effect of his neck and wings, the purple-black-green of his long arched tail, and his bright red comb. Four or five cock-birds can be heard crowing at each other challengingly from both sides of the river in the early hours, and again in late evening. Their crowing is soon joined by the strident triple call of the Partridge. On rare occasions too, we might hear the distant call of a Peacock, that needs no description. Sometimes small flocks of beautiful Painted Sandgrouse might be either heard with their '*chirik, chirik*', coming down for water before light, or even squatting in the scrub path from the dawn onwards, not wanting to fly up until almost run down, and then dropping down again after 30 yards or so of quite strong flight.

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On the river the Red-wattled Lapwing is another early caller, with its repeated '*Did you do it*' that's supposed to be inauspicious to hear. Its cousin, the Yellow-wattled Lapwing may also be not too far away, perhaps on the stony *maidan* near Bomasandra, much quieter than the Red-wattled. Then before full light, there is the moment of magic - the great dawn chorus of birds all around, with the Magpie Robin and Indian Robin probably prominent among them.



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Another early caller is the Indian Pitta usually close to camp at Galiborai. Its Tamil name 'Six-O-Clock bird' is so very appropriate; for some months of the year you can set your watch by its aggressive '*Three Cheers*'. With its green and turquoise back with white and black patches built into the wings and back its browny-orange underparts but for a scarlet bottom and especially its black and white eyestripe the Pitta is fine company to have hopping briskly about near the camp. Somehow though, it always looks a little surly, and can be quite aggressive with other birds, then resorting to flashing its bright wing-patches and emitting quite an alarmingly harsh hiss.

Far more mild is the White-throated Ground-Thrush, though similarly a very attractive looking bird, with a predominance of orange on front and neck, a grey-blue back and tail, and with striking white and blackish stripes down from its eye line. By March the thrush moves off, presumably for breeding, though it's only a local migrant. A pity it doesn't sing while it's with us at Galiborai.

By far the finest singer with such rich, rolling lower notes, is the Shama. In spite of all the clearing of bushes and thicket (especially by Tamarind croppers, but also by cattle and goat herdsmen who move through this stretch of valley every day) the Shama is still to be seen and, even more fortunately, to be heard at Galiborai. In fact, with a modicum of imitative whistling the Shama can be brought quite close with its long, often forked tail flashing its white edges, with fine reddish-orange lower half, very dark-blue head, breast and back, and white rump.

Looking in some ways like a smaller cousin of the Shama, is Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, who is also capable of some fine tin-whistle singing, Six other flycatchers, all beautiful, found at Galiborai are: the Paradise Flycatcher, when in its fully mature male plumage, those white ribbons that make up its tail float ethereally as it flits from perch to perch (more common is the

female and less mature male with russet-coloured body and tail, and blue-black head with crest). Then there is the Black-naped Blue Monarch Flycatcher rather more shy, though with the same typically harsh flycatcher call, 'Weetch, Weetch' and more than once seen with a brood of brown backed youngsters. There are two kinds of Fan-tailed Flycatchers: the White-browed and White-throated. Both fascinate with their tail fanning antics as they search for insects. But the White-browed keeps almost to ground level, and is thus not so easily seen, the White-throated flits about at a higher level, usually in the upper parts of bushes or on trees. Then there is the delightful light blue of the Verditer Flycatcher, and the pert little Red-breasted, usually not found here at Galiborai with much red, being mostly mousey-brown and buff, but with an attractively clear and round eye. The flycatchers in general are a favourite species of mine. A cousin is an oddly big-headed, but still fine-looking bird, the Little Pied Flycatcher-Shrike, the male having an impressive black cap and a pink brown tinge along with its white-with-black colouring.

Real shrikes are also found nearer to Sangam in the scrub: there's the Bay-backed with that rich red-brown back flashing as it flies out for its insect prey, and the larger Grey Shrike, nicely patterned with black and white along with the grey. The shrikes are not liked much by other small birds: I remember a Bay-backed finding its way to our Bangalore compound, and being mobbed furiously and continuously until it left.

Among the most dramatically coloured birds is the Black-headed Oriole often seen very close-by at Galiborai. Against a blue sky or bright green foliage, its brilliant gold body, with jet-black head and wings, is a wonderful sight. It can sing quite flutily, but its harsh 'kark kark', called almost continuously in early spring as it feeds in the trees, sometimes lower on bushes, is not so attractive.

A smaller unrelated version is the Iora, the male's black cap outstanding against its gold, green and white. As its mating flight, it ascends some 6 or 8 feet above the top of a tree, puffs itself out and spirals down like a golden ball. Its call is probably as common, and as varied, as any to be heard at Galiborai. Most common is an attractive fluty descending scale of 2,3 or upto 8 notes, the 2 note call sounding just like a boy whistling admiringly at a girl, which may well be what it is trying to do! This is one of those birds adept at hiding itself while calling away with infuriating clarity. Another is the splendid Gold-mantled Chloropsis, mainly leaf-green with purplish throat and fine gold mantle on the male. It has the misleading practice of imitating other birds perfectly.

A family that I ought to have included among the fish hunters is that of the Kingfishers: sometimes the turquoise and orange flash of the little Common Kingfisher is seen, bulleting along with its tiny little 'scree'. More raucous and large is one of the most common birds of Indian roads, the White-fronted Kingfisher, equally brilliantly-coloured. But the most strident voiced and most striking in plumage is the Stork-billed Kingfisher, seen and heard at Galiborai from time to time with its brown head, superb green and turquoise black, orange front, white neck and massive bright red bill.

Some would say that the most attractive of them all is the Pied Kingfisher, often seen in pairs like a couple of pointers quartering the river, hunting for their quarry, every now and then hovering stationary as they examine some shadow in the water, then diving almost vertically and with incredible speed right down into the water then on the move again if the fish has been missed. Incidentally



one of the mysteries of nature is how those diving birds, unless from directly above, can adjust their aim to the water's refraction.

Out on the rocks, further upstream, along with the Red-wattled Lapwings we can sometimes see the delightful Little Pratincole, long-winged, very short-legged, fork-tailed, just like a biggish swallow when it flies in search of insects. Out there on the rocks there may also be the Large Pied Wagtail, 'weetching' and singing away in its high pitched voice above the sound of the water, tail wagging all the time. Then there are the River and Black-bellied Terns, rather like the Pied Kingfishers on the move up and down the stream continually in search of small fish, large insects and suchlike near the surface. They too dive down for their prey, and sometimes submerge themselves.



As we look out across the river, quite often we can see the Maroon-backed Imperial Pigeon flying from our side into the trees on the other side, or perhaps the reverse. Its moaning call is strangely human. The equally odd warbling whistle of the Green Pigeon is less common, probably because nowadays there are so many fewer indigenous fruit-bearing trees. The Green Pigeon is another skillful hider. In the nearby scrub there is still an abundance of Little Brown and Spotted Doves.



Another arboreal family with a give-away sound is the Woodpecker family, with their variety of 'tap taps'. We have two kinds of Golden-backed, both red-headed but the 'larger' also has a red rump. Then there is the little Mahratta, black, white and red and sometimes we see the tiny Brown-crowned Pygmy Woodpecker, hanging like an Iora or Tit upside down, tapping away on quite a small outer branch. Related to the Woodpeckers there is the Green Barbet, with its oft repeated 'kar-roo kar-roo' that also needs a slightly decayed old tree for boring out its nest; as does the Coppersmith or Crimson-breasted Barbet. The Hoopoe too is usually nearby, with its 'hoop, hoop, hoop' brightly striped black and white wing patterns and crest flicking up impressively when probing the ground with its long curved back, or alarmed on a branch.

The cuckoo family too is well represented. The usually quiet Small Green-billed Malkoha (not really so small) is surprisingly common, with its oily blue-green plumage, its white-striped tail and white-blue bare skin around the eye, an invariable skulker like its cousin the better-known Coucal or Crow-Pheasant. The Coucal's red eye, russet wings, black body and sinister 'honk, honk' from the middle of a thicket, all give some indication of its vicious ways with the nests of smaller birds. Watching a Blue-bearded Bee-eater feeding its young (in the Palni hills) recently I saw a Coucal not only try to get at the young Bee-eaters (impossible down their long earth tunnel but also attack a family of four Painted Bush Quail).

Less unpleasant is the Indian Cuckoo, though parasitic with its eggs, as most cuckoos. Its quite musical 4-note call, 'what's your trouble', is often heard in the valley, and carries for 500 yards or more. More rare, but to be seen, is the Pied-crested Cuckoo, with its 3 note 'pee pee pee'. And anyone who has camped at Galiborai in spring on a moonlit night will not need reminding of the

call of the Hawk-Cuckoo, 'brain-fever, brain-fever', repeated on a rising note *ad nauseam* and with increasing fervour perhaps all through the night. In daylight too this cuckoo might be very close to camp and quite unafraid.

I have written nothing about the Sunbirds, the Munias, the Babblers (especially the Scimitar, with remarkable male-female synchronised call), the Warblers, the two types of Nightjar that fill the night air with their 'chuck chuck', 'tonk tonk', and other mysterious sounds, the splendid little Barred Forest Owlet, sometimes flying from tree to tree quite close to camp, the Blossom-headed Parakeet, the White-eyes, the Bulbuls, the Drongos, the Tree-pies the huge billed, clumsy-flying Grey Hornbills, the prettily coloured Little Minivet, and so many more. I trust that I have at least given some taste of this rich experience of 'birding' in the Kaveri valley. If only this valley is preserved, or, better, reforested.... ! For, each year now there are a few birds less.

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Thank you for publishing my article on the Birds of the Kaveri Valley in your newsletter, though the article was originally intended for people with very little knowledge of birdlife. It's a bit elementary and unsystematic.



Since writing that article in mid-1985, I've identified several further species of birds in the Sangam Valley stretch. Our total list is now 140. I might mention the following: Grey Heron and Purple Heron, Whitenecked Stork, Great Stone Plover, Great Snipe (probably), Mottled Wood Owl, Blue Bearded Bee-eater, Blackbacked Woodpecker, Crested Tree-swift, Scarlet Minivet, Large Cuckoo-shrike and Blackheaded Cuckoo-shrike, Whitewinged Black Tit, Slaty headed Scimitar Babbler, Blueheaded Rock Thrush, Brown-breasted flycatcher, Verditer Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch.

We should take special note of the Whitewinged Black Tit, as in A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent(Salim Ali and S.D. Ripley), only the North West is given as its location. My wife and I identified it in forest scrub country on the north bank of the Kaveri just 4 miles upstream from the Arkavati Kaveri Sangam late in October 1985.



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