

Birds of the Nandi Hills: A Preliminary Survey

by

Kumar D. Ghorpade, Abraham Verghese and B. Mallik
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As residents of Bangalore, situated at an altitude of 916 metres (3006 feet) above mean sea level and enjoying a salubrious climate almost throughout the year, we have, from time to time, felt the absence of purely hill species. This is in spite of the fact that Bangalore and its immediate environs support an incredibly large and varied avifauna, considering that it is mainly an area of open cultivation with scattered trees and patches of short, thorny scrub. In addition, the city itself with its numerous beautiful parks and gardens, the many artificial tanks and especially the peculiar weather conditions which ensure greenery and high humidity all year round contribute towards the presence of a great variety of bird species in the area.

However, as expressed a little earlier, a glance through the checklist of Bangalore birds (maintained by the first author since 1963) reveals a lack of hill or forest species not normally found in the plains of peninsular India. Perhaps the nearest and most easily accessible hills around the city, the Nandi Hills, lie almost due north at a distance of 60 km (45 miles) and are visible from here as a compact block of three rocky outcrops, one of them, Nandidurg, rising some 1416m (4813 feet) above mean sea level. Though most of the original forest cover has disappeared, yielding place to secondary growth, primarily thorny scrub, and the inevitable invasion of the exotic *Lantana* has occurred together with the 'afforestation' with the Australian Eucalyptus, some percentage of the hill flora has persisted, especially nearer the summit. On this latter is a historical fort, built by native rulers and later captured by Tipu Sultan who lost it to the British forces. Within the limits of this ancient fort, at the present time, is an extensive garden maintained by the Department of Horticulture and an assortment of many exotic trees, shrubs and annuals have been planted amongst the endemic flora. Several small rest houses and restaurants oblige tourists in the season which is of course in summer and there is also a spacious inspection bungalow providing accommodation at superior rates. The sides of the hill are clothed with scrub forest mixed with eucalyptus and *Lantana* almost to two-thirds of the way up and the remaining one-third near the peak, besides the fort garden has more broad-leaved vegetation more typical of the environment. At the base of the hills and surrounding them are more low hills covered with short, thorny scrub along with stands of eucalyptus trees and open cultivation with small 'nullahs' and tanks scattered around.

There seems to have been no previous attempt to explore the bird life of the Nandi Hills so we decided to make a beginning towards a final list of the avifauna of these isolated 'ecological islands'. A total of three trips were made during 1973 and a preliminary list was drawn up which is presented at the end of this article. Observations were made on all these trips at three different heights – first, around the base of the hills (3300 feet); second, halfway up in scrub and eucalyptus forest (3900 feet) and third, within the fort-garden on the summit (4800 feet). Since these trips were of a day's duration each, time was necessarily limited and no nocturnal birds were seen or heard. The list is fairly skimpy but should not be taken to indicate a paucity of bird species – in fact quite a few interesting birds were observed which seem to be confined to these hills and are not found near Bangalore city. It is felt that more intensive and leisurely observation, preferably during an extended stay would result in the discovery of many other birds that are not at present on the Bangalore list. The following notes deal with our more interesting findings on the hills.

The first trip was made on January 25 by two of us (KDG and BM) when we were accompanied by Dr. Ryszard Bielawski, a zoologist of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, who spent three days at Bangalore during his tour of India with the first author, who shares Dr. Bielawski's interest in the systematics of Oriental Coccinellidae (ladybird beetles). On this trip we first sighted the Blueheaded Rock Thrush (*Monticola cinclorhyncha*) at 3900 feet in some trees along the road. The two white patches on the bases of the inner secondaries, we found, were good identification marks. We noted that the blue head was rather pale bluish-grey and the band through the eye and just over it, from the lores to the cheeks and ear-coverts was pale grey and not black as in the summer (breeding) plumage. The underparts were light orange and the bird kept mainly to trees. Incidentally, we may mention here that the species name should end with *-rhyncha* rather than *-rhynchus* in keeping with the gender of the genus name *Monticola*. On this trip too we noted with pleasure the occurrence of the Red Spurfowl (*Galloperdix spadicea*), also at this elevation in the scrub forest. Both these species are not recorded so far from Bangalore. We also heard the Grey Partridge (*Francolinus pondicerianus*) here. The Redwhiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*), which is rare around Bangalore, seems to be quite abundant on Nandidurg along with the related Redvented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). Also noted was the Whitebellied Drongo (*Dicrurus caeruleus*), which is fairly common, in winter, around Bangalore.

The second trip was made on April 20, again by two of us (KDG and BM), but owing to the emphasis being on collection of insects (both of us being research students in Entomology at the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore), rather than on birdwatching, besides the sighting of another bird unknown from Bangalore, the Orangeheaded Ground Thrush (*Zoothera citrina*), in full song, nothing especial was achieved. The song of this primarily ground dwelling bird is singularly melodious and its song post was invariably a high branch of some tall tree in the fort garden. Perhaps this beautiful species breeds on Nandi : maybe one day we will be able to locate the

nest here. By the way, for 'splitters' and subspecies-maniacs, we may point out that this could be attributed (for their benefit) to the 'whitethroated' from – *Z.c.cyanotus*, supposed to be resident only in southern India.

The last trip to date was undertaken on December 3 and comprised all three of us. Again, while KDG and BM concentrated mainly on insect collection with a wary eye for unusual avians, AV who was in charge of the lone pair of Yashica 8x30 binoculars, did full justice to the ornithological survey of these hills. Besides resighting of all the above mentioned birds except the spurfowl and partridge, including a female blue rock thrush dressed in olive brown with brown barred white underparts, the following new records were made. Occurrence of both Large Green (*Megalaima zeylanica*) and Small Green Barbets (*M. viridis*) was held to be very significant. The former species is very common in Bangalore city as in New Delhi (INDIAN HANDBOOK 4:151) and is also fairly abundant on the Nandi Hills. *M. viridis* is also found, in smaller numbers, at Bangalore though it is supposed to be confined to the Peninsular hills according to the HANDBOOK. Another notable finding was the observation of a pair of Spotted Babblers (*Pellorneum ruficeps*), which look more like thrushes than babblers, on the summit of Nandidurg. The INDIAN HANDBOOK (6:117) states that it is not recorded from the Deccan Plateau and that it is restricted to the hills upto about 1350 m only. From this record and that by the first author from the Sandur hills in northern Karnataka (Ghorpade, in press, "Preliminary Notes on the Ornithology of Sandur, Karnataka", JBNHS) it appears that this babbler does occur on the Deccan plateau, at least on the more forested hills in the tract. One other noteworthy observation was that of a party of Hodgson's Tree Pipits (*Anthus hodgsoni*) in the fort garden. This pipit is a winter visitor to southern India, mainly in the hills and has been seen by the first author in Sandur also. Besides these sightings, three flycatchers, the Paradise (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), Verditer (*Muscicapa thalassina*) and Redbreasted (*M. parva*) were seen on the summit (1467 m) and Purple Sunbirds (*Nectarinia asiatica*) were seen probing into the pink flowers of a *Stachytarpheta* sp. at 3900 feet.

In the following list i=January iv=April xii=December

I=Base of hills at 3300 feet II=halfway at 3900 feet III=summit at 4800 feet

A Preliminary list of the birds of the Nandi Hills

Pariah Kite	<i>Mivus migrans</i>	i-xii-I-III
Grey Partridge	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	i-II
Red Spurfowl	<i>Galloperdix spadicea</i>	i-II
Indian Ring Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	xii-II
Roseringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	i-xii-I-II
House Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	iv-xii-III
Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	i-iv-xii-I-II-III
Large Green Barbet	<i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>	xii-III
Small Green Barbet	<i>Megalaima viridis</i>	xii-III
Crimsonbreasted Barbet	<i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>	iv-xii-II-III
Yellowfronted Pied Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>	xii-I
Rufoustailed Finch-Lark	<i>Ammomanes phoenicurus</i>	xii-I
Striated Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	iv-xii-III
Baybacked Shrike	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>	xii-I
Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	i-iv-xii-I-II-III
Whitebellied Drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>	i-II
Indian Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	i-iv-xii-I
Indian Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	i-II
House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	i-iv-xii-I-II-III
Jungle Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchus</i>	i-iv-xii-I-II-III
Oriental Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>	xii-II
Redwhiskered Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>	i-iv-xii-II-III
Redvented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	i-xii-I-II
Spotted Babbler	<i>Pellorneum ruficeps</i>	xii-III
Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	i-xii-II
Redbreasted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa parva</i>	xii-III
Verditer Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa thalassina</i>	xii-II-III
Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>	xii-III
Blacknaped Blue Flycatcher	<i>Monarcha azurea</i>	xii-I
Pied Bush Chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>	xii-II
Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	xii-II
Blueheaded Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola cinclorhynchus</i>	i-xii-II-III
Orangeheaded Ground Thrush	<i>Zoothera citrina</i>	i-xii-III
Hodgson's Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	xii-II

Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla caspica</i>	xii-III
Purple Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>	xii-II
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	xii-II
Spotted Munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>	xii-II

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May I correct a small linguistic error in the extremely interesting article, appearing in our May issue, contributed by Sarvashri Ghorpade, Verghese and Mallik ?

At the top of page 3 occur words which show the authors to have relied on the basic rule of Latin that "nouns ending in -a are feminine." Actually, there are exceptions to this rule" eg: 'nauta' (or 'navita') meaning a sailor, 'poeta' meaning a (male or female) poet, and 'agricola' meaning a farmer (always in Roman days, a male). 'Monticola' is evidently analogous with 'agricola' and simply means 'a chap who lives on a mountain', NOT a 'mountain maid'. There is no form 'agricolus' or 'monticolus'.

Whether the authors of the Latin language devised these exceptions for the fun of tripping up future generations of schoolboys (as they have often done) I cannot say; but I am sure they would have felt proud to have snared such birds as *Ghorpade sandurensis* and his two companions.

Thomas Gay