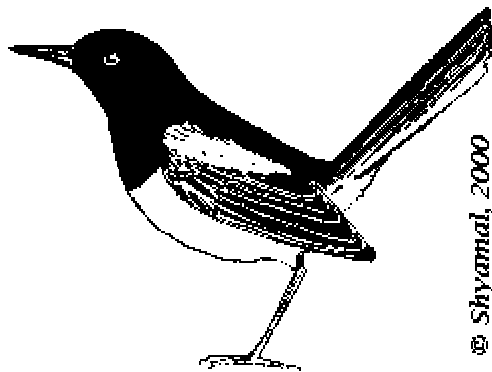


# A Guide to Watching Birds

With special reference to birdwatching in the Bangalore area



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## **Why watch birds?**

People watch birds for a number of reasons. Curiosity is usually the reason for our first look at birds. There are people who go on to watch birds as a challenge to spot, identify and understand their actions and behaviour. There are some others who want to enliven their morning walk by birding. For some birdwatching is a reason to get outdoors and socialize with other bird watchers. There are still others who are interested in seeing as many species as possible which is more in the manner of stamp collection. There are less than 10,000 species of birds in the world and about 1200 of them are found in India. They are diverse enough to be interesting, easy to observe, colourful and interesting and yet not overwhelming (unlike the insects). About 500 species may be found in southern India of which about 300 have been recorded in the Bangalore region.

Apart from being an enjoyable hobby, the study of birds has also led to many advances in many fields such as behaviour, biology, ecology, aeronautics and medicine. It is important to realize that careful observation and note taking by anyone could contribute to the science of ornithology. Many major ornithological studies have in fact been the result of hardworking and careful amateurs.

## **Where to watch birds?**

There is a widespread myth that one has to go to thick forests, bird sanctuaries and the like in order to see birds. The fact is that birds are distributed in all kinds of habitats. There are birds in our cities that are rare in forests. There are forest birds and water birds that are rare outside their preferred habitats.

For a beginner, it is a good idea to start close to home. This allows one to watch at leisure and use time flexibly. Looking at the commoner species around you would help build basic skills that would help later. It is useful to keep a lookout for birds at all times.

Another myth is that one has to trek and walk long distances in order to see birds. This again is untrue and it is usually a lot better when one sticks to small tracts and spends time looking around carefully. Even time spent at a window or balcony can be very fruitful.

The presence of birds in a location is dependent on the kind of food and shelter available there. Their detectability is dependent on the ability of the observer to spot them, which partly depends on the behavior of the bird. Actively moving and calling birds tend to be the first that come to attention. Silent and inactive birds can be quite elusive.

In general, parks, campuses, water-bodies, fields and open lands tend to be good for a large number of birds. Bangalore has a number of such locations. Most of the areas within Bangalore lack undergrowth and scrub. In order to see species that are specific to such areas one has to move out towards the outskirts (an example is the Bannerghatta State Forest). Large water bodies are also present on the outskirts (examples are Hoskote, Hessarghatta and Thippagondanahalli). Good undergrowth and canopy covered habitats can be found in the Nandi Hills and some parts of Bannerghatta.

## **When to watch birds?**

Bird activity varies with time of day and year. Most garden birds tend to become active early at dawn and remain active in the early part of the day. This is the time when they are easiest to detect especially by their calls. They have a second period of activity later in the afternoon. Some of the larger birds of prey, storks and the vultures become active later in the morning when hot thermals are available for them to soar without much effort. Some groups such as the nightjars, owls and night herons are active at dawn and dusk.

The time of year is very significant. In the winter months (October to March) one can get to see our migrant visitors. In the summer months one may get to see the breeding activities of our resident bird species. The rainy seasons are rather difficult for any kind of outdoor activity and bird watching can be unproductive during that period.

## What bird is that?

### Names

When someone asks - “what is that bird?” the expected answer is a **name**. Obvious though this is, bird identification is misunderstood by many beginners as the sole aim of birdwatching. There is a lot more to a bird than just a name. It is a good idea to get to know the names for communicating with other birdwatchers. Although most birdwatchers in India tend to use English names for the birds, many of the birds around us have colourful local names. The existence of local names tells us about how familiar people are with the birds and implies their ability to identify it. Many cultures have great knowledge about the birds and their habits. Urban Indians tend to be quite ignorant of these. An interesting example is the Malayalam name for the Indian Pitta which means ‘Six-O-Clock-bird’, a reference to its habit of calling at dawn and dusk around six. Many birdnames are based on the sound the bird makes. An example of this is ‘Kutroo–pakshi’ (= ‘Kutroo’-bird ) for the Small green Barbet in the *Kodava* language. The hoopoe is yet another bird named after its call. The scientific name for the Eagle owl, *Bubo*, is also derived from its two hoot call.

Similarities and differences in birds lead to their getting longer names. Often a common group name and a qualifier tend to be used. An example would be **Jungle Crow** and **House Crow** for two kinds of crows. New names may also be seen in some cases such as the **Raven**, which has its own distinct name in spite of being a kind of crow. The grouping of birds, as indeed of other organisms, is a science of its own called taxonomy. Taxonomists give every kind of bird a unique 'scientific name'. The scientific name consists of two parts - a **genus** followed by a **species**. The scientific names are given in italics by convention with the first letter of the genus in capitals. Now crows tend to have the genus *Corvus* which is Latin for crow. The scientific name of the Jungle Crow is *Corvus macrorhynchus*. *Macrorhynchus* is Latin for ‘large bill’. As you would have noticed, the 'scientific names' are not very different from the common names in their structure. Knowledge of some Latin roots is useful; it is easy for instance to see that *Muscicapa* is derived from *Musca* (housefly) and *capitus* (to catch) and is the generic name for many flycatchers. The grouping of birds is based on criteria that sometimes change and the result is that rearrangements of these groupings are made based on newer discoveries and these can lead to changes being made in the scientific names.

Most Indian birdwatchers use the English names of our birds as popularized in the books by the late Dr. Salim Ali and other authors. The names used in these books sometime clash with names for the same species in other countries. With an increase in global tourism there is a trend towards standardizing common names for the ease of publishing guides for tourist birdwatchers.

Identifying a bird is essentially the act of consistently being able to assign the same name to the same species of bird. The following is essentially an introduction to identification of bird families that should help you use other bird identification guides. The descriptions are largely for the resident bird species of Bangalore that one might get to see at any time of the year.

Identifying a bird is not very different from identifying a friend in a crowd. The principal identification marks of birds are

## **Location, Size, Colouration, Shape and Structure, Behavior and Call**

### **Location**

Where was the bird seen? What was the kind of habitat? Where was it perched ?

Location can be important in several ways. Bird species are often very habitat specific. It is sometimes possible to get an expert to the same location and get a second opinion on the identity of a bird. Certain locations can help rule out species or suggest others and thus help in the identification. Identification of the birds of an area is made easier by the availability of local checklists. A checklist is a compilation of species of an area made by one or more persons. It is very unlikely that the bird you see is something completely new. A checklist thus narrows down the possibilities.

The kind of perch sites used by birds can also be quite specific. There are species that are always seen on the ground while others may prefer to perch on electric wires.

### **Size**

What was the size of the bird? It is useful to build a relative scale of birds relative to well-known birds. This is very useful in the initial stages of birding. The birds of India vary in size from the small Flowerpeckers of about 10 centimeters to the 7 foot tall Sarus Cranes. The birds of Bangalore range in size from the flowerpeckers to the Grey Herons and Storks. Size can be misjudged and it is a good idea to practice judging sizes in the field.

### **Behaviour**

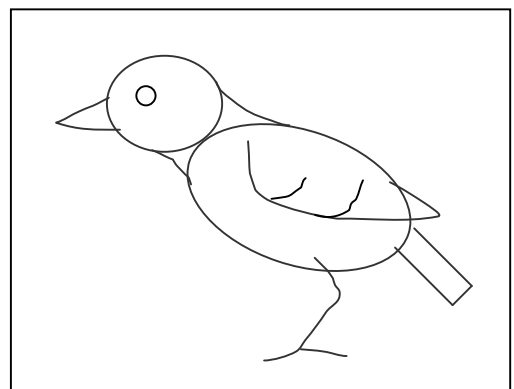
How does the bird move around? Is it very active? Does it call as it moves?

Bird behaviour can be so characteristic that one can sometimes tell a species without any other information. Certain bird groups have behavioural traits that immediately help establish the group. For instance the flycatchers characteristically sit still on a perch, fly out now and then to snap at an insect and fly back to their perch. The leaf-warblers constantly forage along branches while flicking their wings. It is useful to try and describe the gaits of every bird you see as an exercise (Does the bird run, hop, walk or stalk for instance). Try also to describe the flight pattern (Does the bird fly with rapid wing strokes, does it fly in a straight line or does it have a dipping flight, does it hover, glide or dive?)

### **Colouration**

Colour is perhaps what makes so many birds so attractive to us. Colours can however be misleading in bad lighting conditions. One may also occasionally come across individuals showing abnormal plumages with lack of colour, excess black pigmentation or even unexpected colours.

It is a good idea to make a rough sketch of a new bird seen and to make notes on the various parts and their colours. At a later stage you may also note specific details such as the length of the beak in relation to the head, the length of the leg, the position of the body and tail. A rough sketch can be constructed using two ovals for the head and body respectively and building in the details over this.



## Call

Birds communicate with each other to a large extent through the use of calls. Calls tend to be very specific to species. Some species make a variety of calls. There are some species that mimic the calls of other species. Calls are usually described by the use of phrases and syllables, for instance the Red-wattled Lapwing's alarm call is well transcribed as 'Did-You-Do-It'. Identifying species from their calls is a skill that comes with experience.

Many birdcalls have not been fully described and it is quite possible that you might come across new calls that don't match the descriptions given in books.

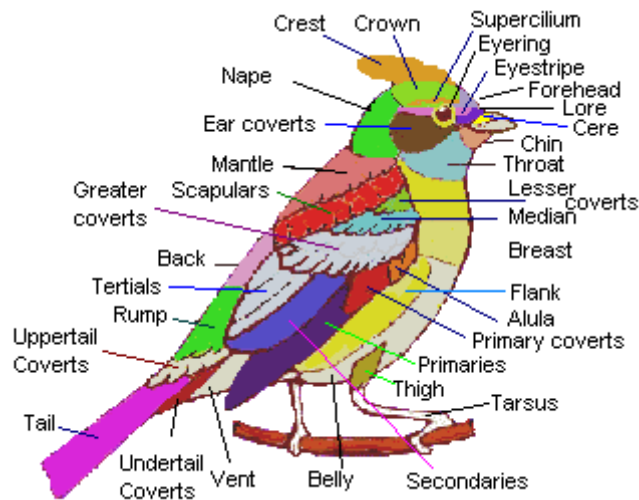
It is a good idea to watch birds calling and try to associate it with particular habits. Calls made when feeding can be very different when calls given out when they take flight or when they fight.

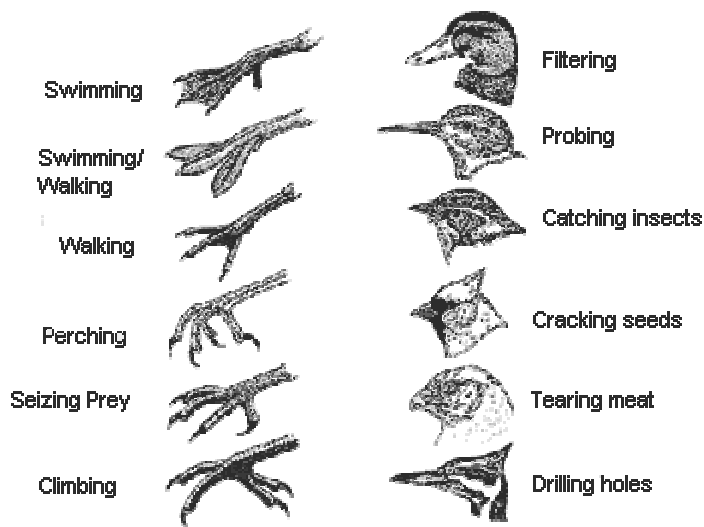
## Shape and Structure

The shape of a bird, its bill, the proportions of its head, neck, body, tail and legs are so characteristic that one can often tell a species just by its silhouette.

It is important to know the parts of the birds. An illustrated key to the various terms for parts of a bird is given here. The bird illustrated is fictitious and the colours are assigned specifically to demarcate the regions indicated.

A number of finer characters of the feet and beak may be identified. The shape of the tail can also be distinctive. The overall ratios of the head, body, and tail are also very characteristic of groups.





### Specific groups and their descriptions

This section describes various groups roughly following the formal biological classification. The groups have been rearranged according to the habitats in which they may be found. The margin silhouettes are not to scale and should merely be used as hints.

#### Groups Found Predominantly near water

Birds that are found in water have many adaptations. Birds that hunt in shallow water by fishing tend to have long legs and long bills and neck. Birds that swim and dive tend to have webbing between the toes to help in swimming. Some groups have waterproof feathers.

##### Grebes

These birds may be seen in some of the waterbodies as a small duck-like bird that dives into water and reappears some distance away. The only member of this group we get to see is the Little Grebe or Dabchick. They are rarely seen flying or on land.



##### Ducks

Ducks are usually seen on some of the larger water bodies. The commonest resident duck is the Spot-billed duck which can be identified at a distance by a white patch on its side. A number of migrant species may be seen in winter. They are surprisingly colourful when seen through binoculars or when seen from near. A somewhat duck like bird that is seen commonly in water bodies is the Coot, this is a black bird with a white bill and face. This however is not a true duck. See the section on Rails, Coots and Moorhens.



##### Cormorants

Cormorants are long necked crow-like birds that occur in medium to large water bodies. Their distinctive feature is the fact that they have feathers that are not waterproof. The result of this being that they have to dry their outstretched wings in the sun before flying. They hunt fish by diving under the surface of the water. They are mostly all black in colour.



##### Pelicans

These are very rarely seen in the Bangalore area but are quite distinctive by their size as well as shape.



### **Egrets Herons and Bitterns**

Egrets are white long legged, long billed and long necked water birds that wade and forage by stalking. Herons are usually not white. The Grey and Purple herons are large and long necked. Cattle Egrets are slightly different in that they may be found in drier areas following cattle and picking insects disturbed by the grazing cattle.



The Pond heron and the Night heron are smaller birds that forage on the edge of waterbodies. The Pond heron is a very common bird by water bodies and is often missed when it is sitting still but is immediately brought to attention when it takes to flight with a flash of white wings.



Bitterns are very elusive and cryptically coloured heron-like birds that hide in grass and are rarely seen.

### **Storks**

Storks are large, heavy wading birds with a stout bill. They are quite uncommon in Bangalore waters but one occasionally gets to see White-necked storks and Painted storks in large water bodies or well watered fields. One may occasionally get to see a flock flying overhead. Storks find food by actively wading with their bills immersed in water and feeling for food with partly opened beaks.



### **Ibises and Spoonbills**

Ibises are large birds with a characteristic down curved bill. Ibises can be seen on dry fields as well as near large water bodies. Spoonbills are large, white and have a distinct spoon shaped bill. They are also found near large water bodies.



### **Rails, Coot, Moorhens**

Rails are found in vegetation around water bodies. They walk most of the time, their flight is weak. The white-breasted waterhen is the commonest member.



The Coot is a black duck-like bird with a white bill and face. It is usually seen in shallow to deep water. Moorhens are larger birds that live on aquatic vegetation in water. The purple moorhen is seen in hyacinth covered lakes. The Indian moorhen is rarer and is seen in undisturbed waterbodies with vegetation cover.



### **Groups Found Predominantly in the air**

Birds that spend much of the time in the air tend to have large and long wings.

### **Birds of Prey and Vultures**

This diverse group of birds include hawks, eagles, kites, vultures and falcons. The owls however may be considered separately. Most of these birds are large and diurnal having clawed and muscular toes with hooked bills. They predominantly feed on meat either by scavenging or by hunting.



The commonest of these is the Pariah Kite. This bird has adapted itself to urban environments and feeds on any kind of refuse. A related species is the Brahminy kite which has a white head. This however has a preference for areas close to water. The Pariah kite has a tail that has a shallow fork.

The smaller birds of prey include the Shikra which is a small hawk that typically hunts sparrows, palm-squirrels and smaller birds. The hawks tend to have rounded wings and longish tails that help them maneuver through foliage and trees.



Falcons are fast pointed winged and long tailed. The commonest falcon a beginner is likely to come across is the Kestrel which is a winter visitor which makes itself immediately distinctive by its ability to hover in one place as it looks for prey. The black-winged kite is a larger black and white bird that also shares this ability and is like the kestrel typically seen in open areas of grassland, often using electric wires as perches.

### Swifts

Swifts are mostly seen in the air. They feed on insects and their flocks are often seen over the city. The most common is the House Swift which is black with a white rump. They make nests in the corners of old buildings and structures using clay. These birds are rarely seen perching except when at the nest.



### Swallows

Swallows are very similar to swifts in size but are usually fork tailed and they are capable of perching on wires. The commonest species being the Red-rumped Swallow which is a resident species and the Common Swallow which is a winter visitor.



### Groups associated with park, field, forest and garden lands

These birds are the most diverse and they account for most of our birds.

### Owls and owlets

Owls are very distinctive in their shape and forward positioned eyes which probably make them look more like some of the primates and perhaps is responsible for the widely believed notion of the 'wise owl'.

They have excellent night vision and their binocular vision helps them detect prey in very low light. They also use their hearing to hunt their prey. The smaller owlets that one gets to see by street lights are the Spotted Owlets. Their screeching is often heard in the early morning and evening.



Larger owls tend to be rarer. Some owls such as the Scop's Owl are more easily heard than seen.

Some larger owls have feathers that stand on their heads and give them a horned appearance. Owls nest in old hollows of trees, sometimes using the eaves of old homes.



### Partridges, quails and gamebirds

These are large birds that typically live on the ground. They have stout legs that they use to scratch the ground to obtain food in soil and litter. The commonly seen members of this family in the Bangalore region are the Grey Partridge, Jungle Bush Quail, Grey Junglefowl and Peafowl. Spurfowl are occasionally seen in some of the forested areas nearby.



### **Pigeons and Doves**

Pigeons are large short tailed birds, the most familiar being the Blue-rock pigeon that is a feral species. These birds are originally inhabitants of cliff faces. Fruit Pigeons are tree dwelling usually greenish pigeons that feed on fruiting trees such as figs. These Green Pigeons are very uncommon in the Bangalore region.



The doves are smaller long tailed members of the same family. They are reasonably common in our residential areas as well as the open areas around the city. The Spotted Dove, Little Brown Dove and the Collared Dove are the main representatives of this group.

### **Plovers, Lapwings**

These are ground birds that are typically long-winged and short tailed. They tend to be found in areas with water or stony and bare open ground. The Little Ringed Plover, Yellow-wattled and Red-wattled Lapwings are the most common representatives of this group.



### **Cuckoos**

Cuckoos are famous for their parasitic habits, however not all of the cuckoos are so. The commonest cuckoos in Bangalore are the Koel which is parasitic on Crows and the Crow-pheasant(or Coucal) which is not parasitic. The Hawk-cuckoo and the Indian Cuckoo are occasionally seen or heard. The Plaintive cuckoo and the Pied Crested Cuckoo are also sometimes seen. The Crow-pheasant is seen in scrub habitats and some gardens.



### **Parakeets**

Parakeets are slim, long-tailed members of the parrot family. The commonly found members in the Bangalore area are the Rose-ringed Parakeets. One occasionally gets to see or hear the Blossom-headed Parakeets.



### **Nightjars**

Nightjars are open land birds that are active at dusk and dawn. They are insect eaters that are rarely seen in the day. They are more easily identified by their calls than by their plumage since they are more often to be met with in poor light. They are sometimes seen sitting on roads. They are very cryptically coloured and hard to identify. The Common Nightjar is fairly easily identified by its call which is likened to a stone skipping on a frozen lake with a series of chipping notes that become shorter and more frequent so as to end with a 'churr'.

### **Rollers, Kingfishers, Hoopoe**

The Indian Roller is often met with on road side wires in open areas. This blue winged bird is named for its aerobatic courtship displays. The Kingfishers are distinctive in having a large bill. Three Kingfishers are commonly found in the Bangalore area. The White-breasted Kingfisher is the one that is often found away from water. The Pied Kingfisher is distinctive in its method of hovering over water when fishing. The Small Blue Kingfisher is one of the most wide spread birds.



The Hoopoe is an orange bird with black and white wings and a distinctive crest. This bird is a ground bird that feeds on insects. It has a slender down curved bill. This bird is widely distributed around the world.

### **Bee-eaters**

Bee-eaters are small mostly greenish birds that are often seen on wires. They sally out to capture insects which they take back to their perch and typically smash the caught insects against the perch before swallowing. Many species have their central tail feathers extending beyond the tail like wires. The commonest species is the Small Green Bee-eater.



### **Sunbirds**

These are very small birds with curved beaks. They feed on nectar obtained from flowers. The males are dark and glossy with iridescent colours that are visible at close range and in good light. The females are usually white or yellowish bellied and olive above. The two commonly occurring species are the Purple sunbird and the Purple-rumped Sunbird. A third species that is perhaps becoming commoner is the Maroon-breasted Sunbird which has a longer bill than the other two species.



### **Flowerpeckers**

These are also very small like the sunbirds with whom they are often found. They however have a short and straight beak. These feed on berries. The Singapore Cherry tree is a particular favorite of these birds. The commonest species is the Tickell's Flowerpecker.



### **Flycatchers**

Flycatchers are small birds with slender and straight bills. They are quite characteristic in their habit of sitting still and looking out for insects. When hunting insects they fly out, capture the insect and typically fly back to a perch. Most of the Flycatchers in our area are winter visitors. The commonest resident is the Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. Flycatchers are typically seen below the canopy of trees.



### **Drongos**

These birds are frequently seen on electric wires. They are largely insectivorous. They are sometimes seen following cattle to feed on insects that are disturbed by the grazing.

The Grey Drongo is a fairly common winter visitor while the Black Drongo is the commonest of the resident species. The White-bellied Drongo and the Hair-crested Drongo are two other species that are occasionally met with.



### **Barbets.**

These birds are stout billed fruit eaters. They are the most prominent of the hole-nesting birds in Bangalore. The two species commonly seen are the Small Green Barbet and the Crimson-breasted barbet or the coppersmith. The latter being smaller and more colourful. The calls of both the species is characteristic. The call of the Small Green Barbet is the familiar "Kotroo-kotroo" and the Coppersmith being a regularly repeated "Tonk" call. Both species drill holes in trees to make their nests.



### **Warblers, wren-warblers, Tailor-bird**

These are small mostly dull coloured birds that are usually difficult to see. There are different groups within the warblers. The wren warblers and the tailorbird have a long upright tail and are the most prominent of the resident species. The Ashy wren-warbler is seen in urban gardens, often nesting in garden bushes. The Plain wren-warbler tends to be seen in open fields. A large number of other warblers including the leaf-warblers are winter visitors to our



area. The Greenish Leaf-warbler and Blyth's reed-warbler are the most common among these.



### **Chats, Robins, Thrushes**

These birds are medium sized and are many have loud and interesting calls. The Chats are small birds that tend to sit upright on perches in open ground. The Pied Bushchat is a common representative of this group and is found in open areas. The Indian Robin is a blackish ground bird that is again found in open areas often alongside the Bushchat. The Magpie Robin (illustrated on the cover) is a black and white bird that is found in gardens and is noted for its song. Other members of this group such as the thrushes are mostly winter visitors to the Bangalore area. Nandi hills is a very good area to see wintering thrushes. The Indian Pitta is a very colourful thrush like bird that is also seen in thick gardens in winter, often seen hopping on the ground under thick cover.



### **Bulbuls, Iora, Minivets**

Bulbuls are medium sized slim birds often with a short crest. The common members being the Red-vented Bulbul and the Red-whiskered Bulbul. The Iora is a very brilliant yellow, white and black bird that is found in scrub areas. The Small Minivet is a slim bird with red or yellow on the wings and is seen in good scrub and light forest.



### **Shrikes**

These are again open land birds with a short hooked bill and usually have a dark stripe across the eye. The Rufous backed and Bay backed shrikes are residents that are increasingly becoming rarer. The Brown Shrike is the commonest winter visitor.



### **Tits**

These are small sparrow like birds that feed on insects in foliage. They are strongly patterned in black, grey and white. They often hang on the ends of branches as they forage. The Grey Tit is the only member of this family in Bangalore.



### **Babblers**

Babblers are dull coloured birds with rounded wings and longish tails. They usually move in groups. The commonest of these is the White-headed Babbler which is sometimes called as 'seven sisters' because of their habit of moving in noisy flocks of around seven. They are frequently seen or heard in garden land.



### **Crows, Treepies**

Crows are some of the most intelligent and widespread birds. They also seem to have made best use of the human population growth. They are mostly black. The all black Jungle Crow and the grey necked House Crow are the commonest representatives.



The Treepies are relatives of the Crows and are sometimes met with in scrub forest areas. They are long tailed and short billed. They have a wide variety of calls.

### **Mynas, Starlings**

Mynas are the commonest members of this group. The Common Myna is recognized by the yellow patch around the eye. They often forage on the ground in groups or pairs. The Jungle Myna lacks the yellow patch and has a tuft of feathers at the base of the upper beak. The smaller members of this group are the Black-headed or Brahminy Myna. The Grey-headed Mynas and Rosy Starlings are winter visitors to this area.



### **White-eyes**

These are small greenish yellow birds with a white ring around the eye. They are often found in garden land. They feed on nectar and insects. They are usually seen in small groups. They have a low call that is kept up as they forage.



### **Wagtails, Pipits**

The wagtails are mostly waterside birds that feed on insects. They characteristically wag their tails up and down as they walk. The Large Pied Wagtail is the commonest resident member of this group and is often seen atop overhead water tanks. Several other wagtails species are winter visitors.



The Pipits are sparrow like short tailed members of this group. They are mostly brown coloured. They are largely seen on open bare ground or cultivation. They run over ground as they forage and take to flight only when threatened.

### **Larks**

These are very much like the pipits in appearance and habitat. They too are found in open land. They are however typically not seen running as the pipits tend to. They also tend to look bulkier and they tend to crouch when followed and take off as an observer nears it. The Skylarks are seen near waterbodies and can be seen fluttering high in the air as they call constantly. The bushlarks are bulkier and are seen in scrub and open land. Their song flight involves flying up into the air and fluttering down with a trilling call.



### **Sparrows, Munias and Finches**

These are short billed smallish birds that are mostly granivorous. The House Sparrow is a typical member of this family. They often forage in flocks. The Munias are colourful little birds that are often seen in fields or perched on wires beside fields.



## How can I contribute?

- Keep notes on the birds that you see around you. This helps you and may also turn out to be useful at a later stage. Keep complete notes on a day's outing. Do not skip what you consider as common species.
- Keep notes on the abundance of the birds that you saw as well as information such as the weather, the trees or plant on which you may have seen the bird, the trees or plants that were in bloom. All these can form the basis of a future analysis that may turn up very interesting and useful information.
- Go beyond the standard field guides. Treat information in books with caution, try to check the information given in them.
- Ask yourself questions. What is the bird doing? Does it have any special adaptations in structure or behaviour? What does it feed on? Why is it calling? Does it have any characteristic behavioural traits?
- Exchange notes with others and publish your observations in birdwatching magazines such as the **Newsletter for Birdwatchers** or join email discussion groups such as **bngbirds**.