

# A race against time and feathers

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Williams, J. J. 2009. A race against time and feathers. *Indian Birds* 4 (5): 168–169 (2008).

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**W**e were one of 32 human teams, racing against birds, against the clock, to see how many different species of the feathered kind we could catch up with, close enough, so we could recognise them by sight or by sound.

An unfair race perhaps? We humans may have had motor vehicles, binoculars and human brains at our disposal, but the birds had wings, telescopic eyesight and camouflage, and the only traffic they would have to contend with along the way were noisy flocks of their own kind. No disrespect to my fellow team members, but I would have been on the birds' side any day!

We had 12 hours to race. Start time 06:00 hrs; finish time 18:00 hrs. At least we would have daylight to help us...but not until sunrise.

Having won the toss of the coin, we opted to field first, choosing to begin our day in the birds' own backyard, well

away from the urban chaos of home but still within 50 km of the city as per the race rules. Here, on the edge of the forest, we would at least be able to hear the soothing songs of nature during the early hours of blinding darkness, safe in the knowledge that we would be far from any unsavoury distractions caused by men and their machines.

We reached our forested starting-post nine hours early. Enough time to allow our rather inadequate senses to at least partly acclimatise to the opposition's home territory.

Under canvas we lay that night, listening first to the gentle breeze and then to the incessant 'did-he-do-it' shrieks of the low-flying Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, as he tirelessly went about his job of disturbing our sleep to give the feathered opposition an even bigger advantage. So much for our own teamwork—these crafty winged creatures already had the upper hand, and we hadn't even started!



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Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*...the pacer!

The clock neared 0600 hrs. The four of us stood like statues in the darkness, torch in hand, our sleepy eyes watching the seconds count down the coming of the starting gun, our ears all pricked-up, ready and waiting for the first sound from the forest around, perhaps from the eerie hooting of an owl?

We didn't need the clock to tell us the time. We didn't need to wait. Right on cue, bang on six o'clock, the silence was broken by the all-too familiar and piercing 'did-he-do-it' calls of the lapwing! What else did we expect?! A ghostly owl hoot would have been a much more romantic way to start, but the lapwing had other ideas. He was of course the referee, the race-starter, the front-runner, and the pacer. He was without doubt the captain of this formidable feathered team. And as we were to find out, he would be with us all the way, popping up many times throughout the day, keeping a watch on us—making sure we followed the rules and didn't come too close to any of his team mates!

There was eventually some silence again as the high-octane lapwing took a well-earned rest, gracefully giving his team-mates a chance to join in the fun.

Ten minutes of tranquillity went by. We stared blankly into the forest from a pond-side clearing, a freshly-brewed chai keeping our hands warm and helping us to calmly re-awaken our senses at a time when it seemed easier to drift off back to sleep. The other birds still slept perhaps, preferring to enjoy their lie-in rather than getting up early for some silly game with a bunch of humans who could never compete anyway!

And then, out of the shadows, we saw a moving reflection in the pond, something gliding over the water silhouetted by the vaguely lightening sky above. With no calls to help us, we struggled to track the movement of this mysterious creature until we finally caught the gleaming bright orange eyes of what was our second bird of the day, a nightjar *Caprimulgus* sp., as it hunted hapless insects in search of the last meal of its nightshift.

The owls all remained aloof, but their no-show was soon forgotten as the habitual early risers soon began their early morning chorus, led by White-cheeked Barbets *Megalaima viridis*, Asian Koels *Eudynamis scolopacea* and Grey Junglefowls *Gallus sonneratii*, and accompanied by a mass of far less-obvious calls from the habitually confusing warblers and other small passerines.

The onset of daylight was indeed a major relief to us, as it was only then, when our eyesight kicked in, that we could start to add to our bird list with some degree of regularity and accuracy. Whilst some birds alerted us to their presence by their call alone (the skulking Spotted Babbler's *Pellorneum ruficeps* happy and tuneful song a good example of this) it was the magnificent colours of feathers reflecting in the early morning sunlight that gave others away. The leading stars of this colourful spectacle included Eurasian Golden Orioles *Oriolus oriolus*, Purple Sunbirds *Nectarinia asiatica*, Copper-smith Barbets *Megalaima haemacephala*, Oriental White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* and Asian Paradise-Flycatchers *Terpsiphone paradise* whilst a single, stylishly costumed Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* made his own presence known as he pecked away at a tree-trunk high above us.

As the sun grew hotter it became obvious our feathered friends were easily getting the better of us, the dense foliage ensuring that far more of them remained elusive than those

that we could spot! It was time for us to move on, to pastures anew where water would be more abundant, where tree-cover would be less and where new birds would be on parade.

In reedy ponds we found Purple Moorhens *Porphyrio porphyrio* and Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea*, Common Coots *Fulica atra* and Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis*. Around dryer rock-pools we were treated to the tail displays of Large Pied *Motacilla maderaspatensis* and Grey Wagtails *M. cinerea* and Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* whilst our eyesight was challenged by the earthy camouflage of pipits *Anthus* spp., and larks *Mirafra* spp.

As the day progressed we crossed several more habitats, ranging from prickly scrubland hiding insectivores such as shrikes *Lanius* spp., babblers *Turdoides* spp., and Small Minivets *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, to a vast wetland roaming with waders both big and small, including Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola*, Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala*, Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius* as well as the usual variety of pure white egrets. In the skies above, Brahminy Kites *Haliastur indus* soared and swooped on the lookout for fish, Lesser Pied Kingfishers *Ceryle rudis* hovered like hummingbirds in their quest for the same, and numerous swallows *Hirundo* spp., hyperactively combed the waters for aquatically inclined insects.

Although the eagles managed to evade us on our race with the birds, we at least managed to see a few other raptors including the Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Shikra *Accipiter badius*.

Nearing the city, as we drove back towards the finishing post, picking up one or two extra species as we wearily looked out of the window, we reminisced on a great day out in the sun—very tiring by the end, yet incredibly rewarding and a lot of fun.

Thankfully we managed to avoid the worst of the Bangalore traffic by spending most of our time in the less populated areas outside the town, although our desire to focus on birding rather than road racing still didn't stop us from being cautioned by a highway patrol police car for the crime of scanning a roadside pond with our binoculars (I must add that we were stationary on the hard shoulder at the time, not driving!).

The traffic police were however no match for what was undoubtedly the most vigilant of all our 'opponents'—an untiring biped who was not only our first bird of the day but managed to follow us pretty much everywhere we went—namely the good old Red-wattled Lapwing.

But... "Did-he-do-it?"

Well, with a little help from the lapwing, the majority of Bangalore's 350 bird species did indeed do it. Whilst the winning human team spotted 130 different birds, over 200 of them had avoided being seen or heard, thus ensuring an overwhelming victory for our feathered friends.

Roll on the next bird race!

[The author was captain of the Wryneck Team, Bangalore Bird Race 2008.]