

colleagues have found many pairs nesting, they have observed and photographed both parents taking part in all family duties.

Additional observations of the nesting of Plum-headed Parakeet in human-built structures would be useful to understand whether this is a more common habit than has been previously observed. Secondly,

the contribution of the male in incubation and feeding of chicks needs to be properly documented.

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## Birds of Sirumalai, Tamil Nadu

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I have never been as serious a birdwatcher as many contributors to *Indian Birds* and during the past ten years my birding has been pitifully casual. But I have always had a strong, latent interest in the activity. So, I have been keeping casual note of Sirumalai birdlife during my movements around the estate, especially those species that I think are uncommon. Through this note I bring to your notice how some of the birds listed as threatened in Santharam (2005), fare in Sirumalai.

Sirumalai is the eastern-most outcrop or spur of the Western Ghats and not, as held by some authorities, an independent range. For one thing, a look at any satellite map will validate what I am saying, with only the Dindigul or Kodai Road pass separating Sirumalai from the Palnis. The pass itself is only 10 to 15 KM wide and is mostly tableland about 150–300 m above m.s.l. And the Sirumalai range stretches about 45 km on the Dindigul Madurai road with its width being about 15–25 km. There is no independent range in Tamil Nadu which is as big - the comparable ranges, the Shevaroy, the Kalrayan and the Kollimalai, all being part of the Eastern Ghats complex.

The flora, of equivalent altitudes, is largely similar between Sirumalai and the Palnis - a comparison of Pallithanam (2001) with either Fyson (1932) or Matthew (1999) will bear this out.

The highest peak of the range abuts our estate (our boundary runs a third of the way up this peak) and is 1,560 m above m.s.l. The house I live in is 1,335 m above m.s.l., and the estate itself ranges from 1,160–1,400 m above m.s.l. The average altitude of the Sirumalai table-top is 1,250 m above m.s.l., with some outlying areas being c. 1,000–1,200 m. So, our climate is pretty much identical to that of Yercaud, the altitudes being similar.

Notes on some common birds in Sirumalai:

**Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis***

Very common. Can be seen almost daily, flying low around the house (trying, no doubt, to get at the chicken run!) or perched on a *Terminalia bellerica* tree and preening. It is quite common all over Sirumalai, including at altitudes up to 1,066 m and I have noticed it several times myself. It is always single, a lazy, low, slow flyer and often simply perched on a convenient tree. **Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*** Quite common. Visible at dusk – less so on our property than at places of slightly lower elevation, say 1,200–1,300 m. One evening, at about 20:00 hrs, one struck the wind-shield of our Jeep (it was probably disoriented by the lights), as we were returning to the estate up the Ghat road, at an elevation of about 1,000 m. I had the driver reverse to where the dying bird was lying and picked it up. It was a male Ceylon Frogmouth. The next day, I had him cleaned, dressed and prepared by one of the workers (we have more than a few who are quite good at it) but, as luck would have it, I was out of arsenic at the time. By the time a supply arrived it was late evening, and maggots had begun their work. My hopes of mounting it for the Bombay Natural History Society were dashed. But the bird is quite common in Sirumalai (and, I suspect, in the Palnis too, at least at similar altitudes, although I am not able to verify this).

**Great Eared-Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis*** Very common again. Usually found squatting in the middle of the road both inside the estate and, especially, on the public roads on the hill-top as well as the Ghat road. Early morning (around 05:00 hrs) drives out of the estate are the best time to see it, although it is seen through the night too, framed in the headlights of the Jeep until one is almost upon it, when this outsized nightjar rises up, wings a-flutter, and, flies in front of the vehicle for some time! That is the time to note the diagnostic neck-band, the large, mottled-brown wings and the (seemingly) ungainly

flight. I have also noticed its ear tufts at times, while it sat in the middle of the road. Most days, on some stretches of the road, one could see a bird every 30 m!

**Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata*** I won't say it is common - far from it, but I have seen this bird on the small lawn in front of the house, for three years running, always late in the spring or early summer. At first glimpse I wondered what a Verditer Flycatcher *E. thalassina* was doing there but then the pale breast was exposed and a quick look at a couple of handy field-guides established its identity. At least on one of the three seasons, I saw a pair, more than once. And, for such shy birds, they are quite venturesome, approaching within 6 m of us as we took tea on the lawn. I saw it mostly foraging on the ground, and occasionally on bush-tops, but never at greater heights than that.

**Other interesting species:** Of course, we have plenty of Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis*. I call them our 'signature birds' and am very proud of those big boys, weaving in and out effortlessly through and between our Silver Oaks' tops. They are seen almost daily and more than a few times sometimes, always circling under the Silver Oak canopy, never in any trouble weaving in and out between the close-planted trees! Occasionally they perch on a Silver Oak, but, being wary birds, unlike the Mountain Hawk-Eagle, never permit a close approach, flying off at the merest sign of movement.

The Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*, which is very common in the Palnis, is conspicuous by its absence in our hills. The biotopes are similar between the hills but we do not have the Kurinchi *Strobilanthes kuntiana*, perhaps because we have 1,346 mm average rainfall as against 1,498 mm for the Lower Palnis, i.e., at comparable altitudes. Maybe the Emerald Dove prefers a marginally wetter climate, but I wonder. There are plenty of White-cheeked Barbets *Megalaima viridis* and Blue-winged

Parakeets *Psittacula columboides* all over the place - the latter preferring Guava trees for nesting. Also, the Malabar Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus horsfieldii*, more heard than seen, but sometimes flying past, always in groups of six or eight, cobalt-blue wings glistening and, on such occasions, raucous screeches rather than song. And, interestingly, our resident (and fiercely aggressive) Magpie Robin *Copsychus saularis* makes a very passable imitation of the Malabar Whistling-Thrush and the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus* as

well as the Redwattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus* - how he has learnt the call of the last I cannot say as the few we hear pass high overhead.

I have not used any Latin names because I still think *Rhopodytes viridirostris* for the Green-billed Malkoha (common in scrub and bush on lower slopes/foothills), but I am aware the evolutionary taxonomists or DNA wallahs have gone and revised that name!

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## The birds at home

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Having lived all my life in the urban jungle of Kolkata (= Calcutta), I was fascinated by the greenery of my in-law's residence in rural Karnataka (Dakshin Kannad). The first things I noticed about my new home were the many birds in the garden and in the trees around the house and the family sawmill nearby. I did not, however, begin to study them seriously till about ten years ago when my husband presented me with a copy of Martin Woodcock's *Collins handguide to the birds of the Indian sub-continent including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Nepal*.

Armed with the book and an ancient pair of binoculars belonging to my father-in-law, I started taking great pleasure in identifying the birds around me. The black birds with forked tails were Black Drongos *Dicrurus macrocercus*, the small purple bird with curved beak was the Purple Sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*, the black and yellow bird that sang beautifully was the Black-headed Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, etc.

All my bird watching is done around my house and as I don't see the same birds week after week, the thrill of bird watching has not yet declined for me. Our garden has flowering plants like rose, jasmine, lantana, marigold and hibiscus and trees like coconut, areca nut, mango, jackfruit, chikoo and silk cotton. We also have plants like papaya, banana and pineapple. Though there is no water body here, the ditches get full with water from the surrounding elevated places in the monsoons and common kingfishers *Alcedo atthis*, red-wattled lapwings *Vanellus indicus* and white-breasted waterhens *Amaurornis phoenicurus* make their appearance. I have not made a scientific study of the birds but

I do take great pleasure in spending the early mornings of most Sundays roaming around our garden and the adjacent mill compound, together comprising about three and a half acres of land.

Cut logs stacked around the saw mill attract woodpeckers, wagtails, bee-eaters and flycatchers. There are two trees, locally called "Daddal" *Careya arborea* and "Maruwa or Hunal" *Terminalia paniculata*, which attract many birds. Sometimes I have seen more than fifteen or twenty species foraging on the trees at the same time. They are always visited by practically every species that can be seen here.

The plot adjacent to the mill compound was vacant till three years ago. It used to be visited by many birds, particularly babblers *Turdoides* spp., and Pittas *Pitta brachyura*. But now people have bought the land and built houses and as a result I no longer see these birds there.

One interesting fact is that Indian Robins *Saxicoloides fulicata* were the most common birds in the mill area. One could always see them on trees or on the logs. I once even found a nest, in a hole in one of the logs, containing three off-white pitted eggs. Funnily, there were never any Indian Robins in our house garden though only a simple fence separated the mill compound from the garden. About three years ago, the numbers of Indian Robins began to dwindle from the usual number of about five to ten pairs till I no longer saw them anymore. Their habitat, the logs and the trees, are still present, as is plenty of food in the shape of insects, and the only explanation seems to be that they were preyed upon by crows *Corvus* spp., and Greater Coucals *Centropus sinensis*. The disappearance of the Indian Robins also coincided with the

adjacent vacant plot getting filled.

The following is a list of the birds I have seen around my house in the past ten years.

White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus*  
 Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*  
 Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*  
 Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*  
 Indian Hanging-Parrot *Loriculus vernalis*  
 Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*  
 Plum-headed Parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*  
 Brainfever Bird *Hierococcyx varius*  
 Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea*  
 Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis*  
 Asian Palm-Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*  
 House Swift *Apus affinis*  
 Small Blue Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*  
 White-breasted Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*  
 Small Bee-eater *Merops orientalis*  
 Chestnut-headed Bee-eater *Merops leschenaulti*  
 White-cheeked Barbet *Megalaima viridis*  
 Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*  
 Small Yellow-naped Woodpecker *Picus chlorolophus*  
 Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense*  
 Heart-spotted Woodpecker *Hemicircus canente*  
 Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*  
 Large Pied Wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*  
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*  
 Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei*  
 Black-headed Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina melanoptera*  
 Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*  
 Scarlet Minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus*  
 Ruby-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus gularis*  
 Red-whiskered Bulbul *P. jocosus*  
 Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*  
 Yellow-browed Bulbul *Iole indica*  
 Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*