

First South Indian Bird Watcher's Fair

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When I met Joe Homan¹, I was surprised to see an older man than I was expecting. It is truly remarkable that a person who came to India forty years ago – ventured into rural, agrarian industries like brick-making, poultry and farming, founded the Boys Town Society and, starting in Madurai (Tamil Nadu), successfully established more than a dozen boys towns in that state – would have the time, at his present age, to become the Honorary Secretary of The Palani Hills Bird Watcher's Society and, to top it, organise a bird fair as its first major project! At the heart of that final decision was a simple secret, which Joe revealed on the drive back to his lovely home, Lakeside Guesthouse, at the end of the Fair. He was passionate about birds since he could remember!

Joe visited the Italian Bird Fair (www.podeltabirdfair.it) (29.iv-2.v.2004) and on returning discussed with friends and colleagues, including Dr S. Balachandran of the Bombay Natural History Society (in August 2004), the feasibility of a similar event in south India. They decided to work under a formal organisation that would take the responsibility of organising a bird fair. The Palani Hills Bird Watcher's Society was registered on 16.iii.2005 with Dr A. David Ravindran, Reader, Dept., of Biology at Gandhigram Rural Institute – Deemed University (GRI), Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, as its founding President and Joe its founding Secretary. The First South Indian Bird Watcher's Fair was organised from 3-5.ii.2006 at GRI. Sri S. Murugaiah, Collector, Dindigul district, inaugurated the Fair, stating that if held regularly, it would enhance the enormous tourism potential of this wonderful piece of the spectacular Western Ghats. S. Theodore Baskaran, special invitee, addressed the gathering on the need for Indian society's active involvement with environmental issues and lamented the disuse of classical Tamil nomenclature for the natural world. Dr Thilagavathy Daniel, Professor and Head of Dept., of Biology, who graced the occasion, invited participants to send papers that she would get translated into Tamil and distributed to various colleges.

The primary aim of the Fair was to popularise birds among students (school and college), the future guardians of the environment, and did it succeed in doing that! Staff and students from 24 colleges and 35 higher secondary schools attended, some coming even from Kodaikanal (45 students) and Chennai (40). In all, at least 1,500 people visited the Fair, if not more. Several activities kept them interested, enthralled, aghast and busy, all by turns. There were more than 20 stalls put up to display and inform of varied organisations and their work. There were eats and items made in cottage industry (nest boxes, bird feeders, wooden bird models, organic foods, ayurvedic remedies, books on nature, glass-paintings of birds, etc). A photographic competition was organised and the entries displayed. The BNHS had a stall as did the Madras naturalists' Society. The Institute of Bird Studies & Natural History's 'Home study course in ornithology' and New Ornithology Foundation's *Indian Birds* shared a stall. Visiting school children were treated to at least two wildlife films simultaneously to accommodate a larger audience. All this activity will no doubt, result in several bird clubs sprouting in schools and many a young aspiring birder will look at neighbourhood birds with renewed interest.

Several prominent birdwatchers / ornithologists of south India were invited / participated in this event. Among them was Dr S. Subramanya, who gave a presentation on the heronries of Tamil Nadu; Dr V. Santharam (introduced the home study course in ornithology and gave an audio-visual talk on woodpeckers of south India); Dr S. Balachandran (demonstrated mist-netting and bird-ringing to an excited ring of kids); L. Shyamal (gave a presentation on documented ornithology in India and its future using computer programmes like his BirdSpot, for recording birding data); Dr Somasundaram (spoke on the avifauna of the Palani Hills); D. Rajkumar (spoke on Bandipur National Park and on south Indian snakes), Dr A. Relton (organised the photographic competition and spoke to the kids), K.V. Sudhakar (Hon. Treasurer of

Madras Naturalists' Society, spoke on his trip to the Kumaon); Dr P. Pramod (Education Officer at SACON, spoke to children on birds of the Western Ghats); S. Theodore Baskaran (author, spoke on classical Tamil nomenclature for nature). Dr Badhri Narayanan (Ophthalmologist!), Kumaran Sathasivam, and Dr Ambudoss, all from Madurai, supported the Bird Fair in several ways.

There were some nice birdwatching outings with colleagues at Lakeside Guesthouse, along the foot of the Lower Palani hills, on the northern shore of Kamraj Dam, where the haunting calls of Stork-billed Kingfishers *Pelargopsis capensis*, which I heard for the first time, rippled ceaselessly across the waters every morning. Rolling hills, fields, water, birds, and great birding company are incomparable ingredients of bliss. One day someone observed that this was good country for Black Eagles *Ictinaetus malayensis* and the next morning, as if it had been whistled up, there was one sailing against the shoulder of the hill. One evening, walking along the dirt road from Lakeside, we approached an ancient banyan tree, with aerial roots firmly entrenched in the ground at various places and the omnipresent village deity underneath. Dusk was on its way and Santharam, shushing everyone, said he'd heard a Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides*. In the back and forth of its energetic whirring flight and that loud electric spark call, all of us watched, enchanted by the orange blush on its chest, which stopped short of the blue throat. A Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi* pranced in the numberless shadows and a Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* sprang momentarily onto an overhead wire. No one spoke out loud what must have been ringing in every heart. Those bright-eyed youngsters at the Fair have an amazing, entirely new world awaiting them!

¹ For more information visit www.joehoman.org.uk.