

# Rishi Valley after the rains

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**F**inally the rains came to break the long dry spell in 2005. It rained so much (1,174mm against the annual average of 700mm) that all the water bodies filled up and streams, long forgotten, came back to life. In the campus, we had water flowing in the streams for over three months. Outside the campus, streams were running even in the dry season in early 2006. With the rains, greenery returned. Vegetation that had turned brown was now lush. Several species of plants that had remained dormant as seeds came to life. The rains of 2005 left the campus verdant well into the dry season in early 2006—a period when the campus generally wears a dry look. In 2006, the monsoon arrived early, in late May, but after the initial wet spell, the rains became sporadic, though the total rainfall was close to normal (567mm).

What about birds? I expected the ‘miraculous’ return of species that had disappeared several years ago, following the onset of the drought. Some birds did return, while others didn’t, at least not immediately. But what was even more surprising was that a few, commonly seen during the drought years, suddenly disappeared!

Among those that returned were the raptors—the Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, White-eyed Buzzard *Butastur teesa*, Oriental Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, the Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* and Bonelli’s Hawk-Eagle *Hieraaetus fasciatus*. Some of these even appeared to nest. I located the nest of the White-eyed Buzzard atop a roadside *Acacia* tree, outside the school campus, in late March 2006. For over ten days, on my morning walk, I saw the activities of the birds and when I saw the bird at a nest on 25.iii.2005, it appeared to be incubating. Unfortunately, I could not follow-up and monitor the outcome of their effort, as the school closed down for vacation and I had to go away. However, after my return in June, I saw individuals in the vicinity. The nest, some 10 m up in the tree, appeared intact. I presumed that the birds bred successfully. Evidence of other nesting raptors includes Honey Buzzards that were seen in pairs and also heard calling on several occasions in September and December 2005 and in June 2006. In June 2006, there was a sighting of a juvenile Tawny Eagle. Bonelli’s Hawk-Eagles, in pairs, were seen regularly since June 2006. Short-toed Snake

Eagles too were back and there were instances when both these raptors hovered, without a single wing-beat, over the rocky hillocks and open scrub areas, and plunging down to capture prey.

On the evening of 18.iii.2006, I had a thrilling encounter with a Short-toed Snake Eagle that took off from a few metres ahead of me from the roadside hedge of agaves. It appeared to be struggling with something it had in its talons. A few seconds later, no



Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*

longer able to hold on to the prey. With a thud the dangling snake dropped on to the road! The rat snake *Ptyas mucosus*, nearly a metre in length, showed no signs of life, except for a slight twitching of the tail, as I approached it, some ten minutes later, after giving up hopes of the eagle claiming its victim.

Some of the birds I had hoped would return as soon the rains came, disappointed me. Especially the kingfishers—Small Blue *Alcedo atthis* and Lesser Pied *Ceryle rudis*, which had deserted (forsaken?) us several years ago. There was water everywhere in the region and perhaps that was why they did not visit us. In early August 2006, one Lesser Pied Kingfisher was seen at the lake near the main road. Our efforts to count birds in winter too met with little success. There was water in all the lakes but very few birds.

The White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* too showed no signs of coming back to the campus. In June 2006 I heard it outside the campus. It was only towards July-end, that I finally located two pairs of birds in our paddies. On 17.ix.2006, I located Streaked Fantail-Warblers *Cisticola juncidis* in the same paddies, also seen in these parts after a long gap. Although we had attempted paddy cultivation last year these birds were not seen. Why did they turned up after such a long gap? One reason could be that this year there was more paddy cultivation in the region thanks to the abundant rains of 2005. The other, more significant reason, could be that we cultivated rice using traditional methods this year, whereas last year we followed the SRI (systematic rice intensification) method, which does not require stagnant water in the field—a method that promises to conserve water. This year, we used a crop variety that can be harvested more quickly (180 days). These methods are no doubt environmentally friendly, but do they take into account the needs of birds that are dependent on paddy fields for their breeding and survival? Imagine the fate of these birds when all of our rice cultivation is done with these “eco-friendly” techniques.

The Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* was one of the species that promptly turned up after the rains in November 2005 and again in 2006. The elusive Red-wattled Lapwings *Vanellus indicus* became commoner and in February 2006, their behaviour indicated that they had a nest / young near the Percolation Tank. Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* occupied the Percolation Tank from early December 2005 and soon their numbers were up from just a pair to more than two pairs. I located a nest, concealed amongst the *Ipomoea* clump and, within a month there were chicks around it. By late February, the numbers had steadily climbed to 11 individuals, mostly chicks raised from two nests on the tank. After this, their numbers declined as the water level also fell. By early June, I could locate 16 birds at a tank three kilometers away, near the main road. Another visitor that dropped in, thanks to the abundant water, was the Clamorous Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*, which was seen on a bush at the Percolation Tank in December 2005.

Since April 2006, I have been hearing calls of juvenile Brown Fish-Owls *Ketupa zeylonensis* on the campus. Often the birds were seen perched on rooftops near my house, silently taking off when disturbed. These birds were around until mid-August. We believe that Indian Grey Hornbills *Ocyrceros birostris* also successfully raised a chick somewhere in the school campus or in its immediate vicinity. They were now seen more regularly.

On 30.vii.2006, a third bird was seen with the pair and it lacked the casque, and hence was presumed to be a juvenile.

Indian Plaintive Cuckoos *Cacomantis passerinus* were heard in campus in June and July 2006. In the earlier years I had seen them here but had never heard them sing, though one could hear them in the nearby Horsley Hills. Great Tits *Parus major* were seen with fledglings in late June 2005 and again in May–June 2006. In July–August 2005, Common Mynas *Acridotheres tristis* raised two successive broods in an old tree-hole. Between February and April 2006, Common Wood-Shrikes *Tephrodornis pondicerianus* raised two broods in succession in a fragile-looking nest on a roadside tree. In mid-June 2006, there were young Jerdon’s chloropsis *Chloropsis cochinchinensis* with their parents and two weeks later, a branch of a *Peltophorum* tree, cut to make way for a building, had a nest of the Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* with three young ones that were about to fledge. This branch was preserved intact and placed close-by and we could watch from a distance the adult birds come in to feed the young. After nearly a week, the young were gone, hopefully flown out of the nest safely. In August 2006, there were Rufous Treepies *Dendrocitta vagabunda* with young. Red Munia *Amandava amandava* also returned to the campus after a long gap. I located over 25 birds including 4–5 in breeding plumage in January 2006 and could see them for sometime in the open fields. In mid-September, Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus*, which were here earlier in the month of March in 2004 and 2005, turned up, and up to ten birds were noticed for nearly two weeks.

Those that disappeared (for some period at least) include: Rufous-tailed *Ammomanes phoenicurus* and Ashy-crowned Finch-Lark *Eremopterix grisea*, Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina macei* and the Painted Spurfowl *Galloperdix lunulata*. The Rufous-tailed Finch-Larks turned up in late August 2006, after a long absence of several months since the commencement of rains in 2005. The Ashy-crowned Finch-Lark, never common in the vicinity of the school, is yet to show up at the time of writing this (December 2006). However, they were seen elsewhere, 25 kms away from the campus, last month. The cuckoo-shrikes were around till June 2006 and as I write this, the Large Cuckoo-Shrikes *Coracina macei* have been seen again in early December 2006. The Painted Spurfowl which had been very vocal previously, have been silent since the onset of rains in 2005. I do get reports of occasional sightings from my colleagues and students. But I am intrigued at their silence. On the other hand the Grey Francolins *Francolinus pondicerianus* appear to be on the increase and are most regularly heard from the wooded areas of the campus.

What this experience taught me was that there are several factors responsible for the presence / absence of birds—rain or drought being two among them. This region is a chronically drought-prone, with good rains once in 4–5 years. The vegetation as well as the other organisms seem to have adaptations to respond appropriately to the prevailing conditions and on the whole, doing well. It is the interference from human activities that cause most problems, and some of the changes caused by these, being rapid, give little time for species to adapt. Left alone, they would continue to thrive however severe the weather conditions be.