

may-awe, my-awe and on 25th October I came across a Peahen with three chicks resting on a track running alongside a pipeline.

'Of late I have been watching the female Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, which was written about by our Editor in an article published recently in a Sunday newspaper. Flying over the 'damp littoral' at Vihar sending up wagtails, pipits, larks, munias, etc. and even hoopoes. I never see her catch anything; not that I'm sorry as she looks well-fed. On 19th January a King Vulture *Torgos calvus* was in the same area eating a cattle carcass in the company of Jungle Crows. But on to more pleasant subjects—also in the same few square acres or so. Namely, a fully adult male Bluethroat *Erithacus svecicus*. On 17th January this sprightly robin-like bird was hopping around amongst herbage and flew when I walked towards it. Fortunately it flew only a few yards and then settled on the ground again where I had a perfect view of it for about five minutes as it hopped around picking up insects. This Bluethroat had a white (not chestnut) patch withing the blue throat and was presumably of the race *abbotti*. The Bluethroat had quite a tussle with a green caterpillar before stunning it sufficiently to deal with. Prior to swallowing this succulent morsel the Bluethroat gave a delighted little call. Also in this area I noticed a female Collared Bushchat *Saxicola torquata*, BUT no male, on the margin of the Lake. I'm mentioning her because I see many male Collared Bushchats on the telegraph wires, bushes and shrubs beside the Goa Road

and the road to Alibag, without seeing even one female—on some days. Against, say, fifteen males seen in a stretch of road of twenty miles I manage to see only one or two females at most. I suppose the females must be in fields further away from the roadside but I've searched in vain for them. I find that, in contrast the pairs of Pied Bushchats *Saxicola caprata* keep very close together.

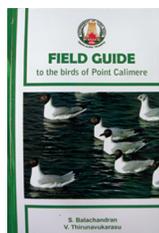
'There are now many Common Snipe around Vihar Lake and quite large gatherings of duck on the Lake. From what I can see they are mainly Common Teal *Anas crecca* and on 4th January there were about 20 Pintails *Anas acuta* amongst them.

'On 18th January on a mud-bank at Dharmtar, near Pen, there were six Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* swinging their bills, hockey-stick style, through the mud. With them was a Reef Heron *Egretta gularis*—slaty phase—catching mudcrawlers. It was enlightening for me to watch the bird walk to the water and wash its bill clean after each jab—whether successful or unsuccessful—into the mud.

'At Panvel tank on 18th January there was an Open bill *Anastomus oscitans*. At Panvel such birds as In ttle comorants, Pheasant-tailed Jacanas, Bronzewinged Jacanas, Purple Moorhens, Cattle Egrets, Paddy Birds and Smaller Egrets appear to have bred successfully during the last monsoon. Cotton Teal are also seen there now.'

— D. A. Stairmand. 1970. *NLBW* 10 (3): 8–10.

— Book reviews —



Field guide to the birds of Point Calimere by S. Balachandran & V. Thirunavukarasu. Bombay Natural History Society, Tamilnadu Forest Department. 92 pp +xxvi. Paperback. Price not stated. 2009.

This is a concise field guide to the birds of Point Calimere (Kodikkarai) Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the best birding sites in southern India, located on the eastern seaboard, in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu. Well-known for its migrant waterbirds, this site has been studied by the Bombay Natural History Society since the late 1960's and was a major field research station where thousands of waders, waterbirds and landbirds have been ringed over the decades. The tropical dry evergreen forest and swamps of the sanctuary are a wintering and stop-over site for several waterbirds, shorebirds as well as passerines (estimated at over 1,00,000 individuals) *en route* their wintering grounds in the southern Western Ghats and Sri Lanka. Some unusual birds recorded from this area in the past include the White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*, Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Long-billed Ringed Plover *Charadrius placidus*, Caspian Plover *C. asiaticus*, Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer*, Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaeus*, Pompadour Green Pigeon *Treron pompadora*, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon *T. bicincta*, European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx erithacus*, Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*, Broad-tailed Grass Warbler *Schoenicola platyura*, and Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra*, just to name a few. This site is now a Ramsar site (the only one in Tamilnadu) and an Important Bird Area (IBA).

This book covers 274 species of birds recorded from the sanctuary. Each species is illustrated with a colour photograph. The text is organised under the following sub-headings: Size, field characters, distribution, habitat and status at Point Calimere. With three species per page, including the photographs, the book is well laid-out and pleasing to the eye. The photographs have been contributed by well-known photographers like Clement M. Francis, P. M. Lad, and Vijay Cavale. The pictures are of good quality and the book is printed on art paper. Besides this main section, there is a preface that contains a brief introduction to Pt Calimere and its birdlife, three maps (two of which show the localities of recoveries of birds ringed at Pt Calimere, the third being a satellite image of the sanctuary area), two diagrams describing the parts (topography) of birds, a glossary of the technical terms used, and a series of tables which help in identifying birds through certain key characteristics (mostly based on size, colouration, sizes of beaks, legs or tails).

The general description, distribution and habitat sections follow those of Ali & Ripley (1983), and Kumar *et al.* (2005) and are fairly comprehensive giving sufficient details to aid identification of birds including those in juvenile and winter plumages. But the most interesting part of the text is the section on the status of birds at the sanctuary. Here, the authors provide very specific details like, localities where birds may be seen, months when they could be seen, changes in their abundance, status, *etc.* I found this section the most useful one since a lot of the information given here has not been published elsewhere and has been compiled from the notes of earlier workers and the senior author who has spent over two decades here at the sanctuary, studying bird migration.

It comes as a shock to learn that there has been a drastic decline in the populations of waders that winter here—from 500,000 in the 1980s to 100,000 or less at present! It appears this is also true for migrant ducks. Pintail *Anas acuta* numbers have plummeted from

200,000 to < 50,000 at present, and flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* have also dwindled from 40,000 individuals to < 5000 in the last decade. About 70 species enlisted in this book (including the star attractions and vagrants) have not been seen here in recent times. Very surprisingly, this includes Coppersmith Barbet *Megalaima haemacephala* and the Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*, birds which are quite common in similar habitats elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. I am not sure if some of the species have really disappeared or if this is because there have been fewer birders visiting this sanctuary in recent times. For instance, when I visited the sanctuary in November 2008, I came across at least three Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea* at the Muniappan Eri, which, according to this book, has not been seen within the sanctuary limit in the last 25 years. I was also pleasantly surprised when I found that the Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* and the Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* I saw on this visit were additions to the list of birds of the sanctuary! However it is reassuring to know that populations of a few other species have been on the increase and there have also been records of some species that were not recorded here earlier in recent times or not seen here for long periods.

The book could have been better edited as there are quite a few minor errors. It would have been more comprehensive had it included a list and a detailed sketch map of birding sites within the sanctuary highlighting various species that one could look out for. A detailed bibliography and references for the various earlier records that are discussed in the section, 'status at Point Calimere', would have been invaluable to researchers and the more serious ornithologists visiting the sanctuary. Inclusion of descriptions on calls of birds as well as the Tamil names would have added value.

There are a few other minor technical errors that I wish to point out: The book includes the Red-winged Bush-Lark *Mirafra erythroptera* whose identity was questioned by Abdulali (1985). I had seen only the Jerdon's or Rufous-winged Bush-Lark *M. affinis* here during my last visit in November 2008. There is no mention of the Philippine Shrike *Lanius cristatus lucionensis*, which was reported by Balachandran & Alagar Rajan (1994) and the Dark Thrush *Turdus obscurus*, reported by Harrap & Redman (1989). I am not sure if the Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina*, seen at Point Calimere, belongs to the subspecies *cyanothus* or *citrina*. There is a mismatch between the description and the photograph. The book lists Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* as a resident species, which is somewhat intriguing since there are no ideal nesting sites for this bird in the sanctuary or in its immediate vicinity. I had seen the migratory subspecies *calidus* here on my last visit. There are no details given on the sighting of the Long-billed Ringed Plover, reported from the sanctuary recently by 'a birdwatcher'.

Overall, this is an important publication concerning the birds of Tamil Nadu. It is a handy guide containing useful information on the changes in the status of birds in the sanctuary over the last three decades. One hopes there will be more such publications in the country. A Tamil translation of this work would help create more awareness among the non-English speaking Indians and help them better understand birds and their natural history.

It has been my experience that publications such as these, brought out by Forest Departments, are never accessible to the public at large, and remain buried in the godowns of the department, unknown to anyone! It would be a shame if this book too was to meet a similar fate. I do hope that it is sold at a nominal price to visitors of the sanctuary.

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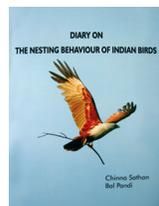
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—V. Santharam



Diary on the nesting behaviour of Indian birds by Chinna Sathan and Bal Pandi. Published by V. S. Geetharani, Sugeeth Publisher, 17, SVL Nagar, Suler, 641402 Coimbatore Dt., Tamil Nadu. E-mail: sukubird@yahoo.com. 223 printed pages. Paperback. Price: Rs 650/-

This book is quite unique, since it is not another bird book that lists birds of a given locality, with second-hand information on identification, distribution, etc. Instead, the authors have attempted to put together original information, from their own field experiences, on the nesting behaviour of 51 species, many of which are common birds. This book is a labour of love and dedication. It has been produced with the good intention of sharing the joys and knowledge of watching and studying birds. It is profusely illustrated with colour photographs contributed by several photographers, chiefly by: T. R. A. Arunthasvelvan, Srinivasan Durairaj, Sivaprasdh (*sic*), N. Radhakrishnan, Dr M. S. Mayilvahanan, and Shanmughanandhan E. The line drawings are by the first author.

The book opens with a message from the Hon. Minister of School Education, Tamil Nadu, Thangam Thenarasu. Ashish Kothari has written the "Foreword", a must read for all those who want to buy the book (it can be found along with other details about the book including the Introduction at: <http://www.nestingbook.webs.com/>). This followed by a several chapters: introduction, habitation (*sic*), mysterious behaviours of birds, breeding biology, followed by species-wise accounts (which is the main part of the book), birds of prey, predators of nests, a family dedicated to birds (short notes on the authors and contributors), indices of sketches and photographs, including credits and references.

The main section, 'Nesting behaviours of birds', deals as mentioned earlier, with 51 bird species that are categorised under: scrape nests, twig nests, tree hole nests, tunnel nests, cup nests, ball nests, floating nests, building (*sic*) nests, pendant nests, and stitched nest. The title of the book is somewhat misleading since one expects to find the text presented as anecdotal/datewise accounts. But the format is one wherein the authors have organised the data into sub-headings in most cases and only in a few species, the data is presented as date-wise entries. The following are some of the sub-headings: habitat, sex (*sic*), breeding season, breeding plumage, courtship, mating, nest, clutch, incubation, egg, guarding, chick, parental care, sub adults, roosting, general note, predator, special aptitude (*sic*), mud bath, tail information, rearing the young, peculiarity, feeding, territory announcement, cleanliness of nest, marvelous nature, bath, nourishment, special information, day stay, etc.

The text needs to be heavily edited, though there is no doubt it does make for delightful reading in its present form—"Edges of lake! Oh! Bring me immense joy. See there!" (p. 5); "After repeated attempts only, the female accepts the overtures of the cock like the heroine of a cinema love story" (p. 32); "It is like a meditative bird with valour" (p. 118); "If the cock offers the gift mouth to mouth the two develop closeness just like a boy offering a bouquet or ice cream to the girl he loves" (p. 195); "They become exceedingly noisy, hurling acrimonious abuses at each other. I saw on several occasions a pair of Black Drongos perched on a telegraphic wire yelling at each other in rhythm, one after another. They indulge in premarital display" (p. 143). Often, the interpretations of bird behaviour tend to be completely anthropomorphic.

Though this book has presented several interesting and original observations, the authenticity of these have not been cross-checked. For instance, the book states that the Yellow-wattled Lapwing's eggs hatch in 17 days, the Indian Courser's in 13–15 days, the Red-wattled Lapwing's in 17 days, the Spot-billed Duck's in 15 days, whereas, being nidifugous, the chicks of these species need longer periods of time to develop. The book gives the incubation periods for smaller birds that have nidicolous chicks as follows: Coppersmith Barbet, 13 days; Hoopoe, 16 days; Small Bee-eater, 17 days; and so on. The average incubation period for lapwings is about 4 weeks. I had observed this from the close study of a nest of a Yellow-wattled Lapwing at the Adyar Estuary, several years ago (Santharam 1995). The authors have not described their methodology of studying nests, especially for those birds that nest in holes, where there are problems determining clutch sizes, incubation period, etc. Also, there are no indications as to how many nests were studied to arrive at the results presented.

There are some statements that need further substantiation: "A pelican consumes at least 5 kgs. of fish a day"; "it has worms inside the stomach which devour the fish in minutes" (pg. 103);

"the male and female discussed this sitting on a twig" (p. 186, while describing an incident when the nest of a sunbird was damaged by a cat). [The italics are mine].

There are a few other minor errors in the text: The authors have misidentified the Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dinopium benghalense* as the Greater Golden-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes lucidus*. We are left to guess the identity of the "Little Falcon" and the "non-venomous water viper" (p. 48).

All these may mar the scientific value of this publication.

The book is printed on art paper and the choice of photographs could have been more selective, as they are of varying quality and in some instances, repetitive. This would have allowed more space to print the better ones on a larger format, adding more appeal to the book. I also feel that the inclusion of close-up photographs of newly hatched chicks at the nests should have been avoided since some of these could have been subject to predation thanks to the attention drawn to it by the photographers. Some of the line drawings too could have been avoided, and the captions chosen more carefully.

Overall, though this is a good effort to document the nesting behaviour of Indian birds, inaccuracies, poor editing and interpretation of behavioural data, make this book only acceptable in parts, but may not find favour among the scientific community. Hopefully it would help encourage more birdwatchers shift from a "listing mode" to the more serious "study mode", which would contribute to our collective knowledge of the habits of our birds, including the commonest species.

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—V. Santharam

— Postcard from Singapore —

5th International Hornbill Conference

Ragupathy Kannan

When Singapore announced its intent to host the 5th International Hornbill Conference some birders' eyebrows, including my own, were raised. After all, Singapore, a bustling city-state, which was once cloaked in dense tropical rainforest, lost all its hornbills over a century ago, with the last Oriental Pied Hornbill recorded in 1855. But many of the delegates were pleasantly surprised to learn that the Oriental Pied Hornbills are back. After more than 130 years, they reappeared in 1994 in Pulau Ubin, an islet north of the main island of Singapore. Since then about 40 birds have been spotted, some even in "mainland" Singapore.

The organisers effectively used these welcome newcomers as the mascots of the conference (22–25 March 2009). Singaporeans presented fascinating papers on their effort to protect this locally rare population. In post conference fieldtrips, the organisers proudly showed off the birds in the wild, including some carefully controlled group visits to a pair breeding in an artificial

nest box in Pulau Ubin. And what a 'wired' artificial box it was! Some of the most fascinating papers stemmed from these ultra modern "smart" boxes, which not only have video cameras monitoring every activity round the clock, but also record weights of parents and chicks, and even that of the morsels brought in by the parents by weighing parent before and after food delivery! The video cameras successfully documented infanticide-cum-cannibalism in this species.

Over a hundred participants, hailing from 19 countries, presented a wide variety of papers. Topics ranged from status and distribution to home ranges, breeding biology, impact of humans, and research methods in captivity and in the wild. Surprisingly, none of the papers directly addressed seed dispersal services rendered by hornbills, obviously showing how neglected this topic is, an issue that was raised by Margaret Kinnaird's keynote address (more on this later in this report). There was a noteworthy and ground-breaking