

Birds of Sirumalai, Tamil Nadu: 1980–2009

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Introduction

This paper reports the birds observed in Sirumalai (Little Hills) in the Dindigul district of Tamilnadu by the author in the years 1980, and 2009. It includes observations reported by Swami (2006), and additional reports by local informants to the author in 2009. It also makes reference to a list of the birds of the Palani Hills published by the Palani Hills Birdwatchers Society¹.

The author was privileged to stay in the village of Sirumalai Palaiyur for a period of eight months, from January to August, in 1980, and to return for a period of five days in January 2009.

In geological terms it would seem that Sirumalai is one of the southernmost outposts of the Eastern Ghats.² However, in terms of its location, it is close to the Western Ghats, and more particularly to the spur of the Palani Hills, from which it is separated at the narrowest point by a distance of only 12 km or so. Although Sirumalai has been studied in some detail in terms of its flora (Pallithanam, 2001; Karuppusamy *et al.* 1999; Kottaimuthu *et al.* 2008), there seems to be little of substance published on its fauna in general or, other than Swami (2006), on its birds in particular.

Sirumalai lies to the north of Madurai, and to the south of Dindigul. The surrounding plain lies at an average height of about 300 m. Sirumalai, roughly speaking, consists of an outer ring of hills at an average height of about 1,000 m, though with a number of peaks exceeding 1,350 m, and a central bowl at about 700 m. The hills rise more or less abruptly from the plain in the north, west, and south while tapering away into low hills to the east. Much of the hills are reserved forest, including areas of more or less natural dry evergreen and semi-evergreen forest; some is coffee, and other plantation, often with mature, planted tree cover; and the remainder is cultivated by local smallholder agriculturalists or larger landowners. Three main streams run through the hills, and down to the plains. Sirumalai receives its only significant rainfall between October and December with the NE Monsoon.

Environmental changes: 1980–2009

There has been a noticeable increase in forest cover in Sirumalai since 1980, particularly in the interior. This is despite some recent clearance for new farms, including for the growing of cut flowers. This increase is presumably at least partly the result of the efforts of the forest department. It is certainly the case that timber is no longer being extracted by the lorry-load, often illegally, to the extent it was in 1980. It may also be due in part to older small holdings, many of which were recently cleared in 1980, now having more trees, both for fruits, and to provide shelter for growing coffee. The arrival of a viral disease of bananas in the late 1980s or early 1990s may also have contributed. Sirumalai is locally well known for its small, sweet hill bananas, which were grown both by smallholders and in monocrop plantations. Unlike coffee, the bananas do not require shade, and their cultivation therefore led to clearing of forest, and scrub. However, banana cultivation is now much reduced. There has also been an increase in forest cover on

the Northern-most slopes of Sirumalai, where the only road into the hills winds up from the plains South of Dindigul. However, the remaining outer slopes of the hills remain semi-denuded as a result of firewood collecting by people from the surrounding villages on the plains.

Identification, naming & listing

In the table below, a full list of the birds of Sirumalai, both, reported by others, and observed by myself, is given in the first column, following Manakadan & Pittie (2002). The additional columns require further explanation:

When I arrived in Sirumalai in January 1980, on my first visit to India, from the UK, I was a reasonably experienced birdwatcher in terms of UK birds, but I had no illustrated field guide to Indian birds to assist me with this, to me, new avifauna. Indeed no modern field guide existed at that time and I was not aware of Salim Ali's *The book of Indian birds*, any edition of which would at least have got me started. I did find a copy of Baker & Inglis (1930), but this was hardly illustrated, and was as keen to advise on how to shoot the birds as to help identify them! However, in April 1980 a copy of the then recently published *Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent* (Woodcock 1980) arrived in the post, sent by a friend for my birthday from the UK. I mention all this because, combined with having other work to do on first arrival in Sirumalai, it meant that I did not start seriously identifying the birds I was seeing until April, and I therefore missed most of the birds that were winter visitors to the area. In 2009 I deliberately chose to visit during winter. These facts are reflected in the birds observed, as shown below.

In January 2009 I used Grimmett & Inskipp (2005) as my field guide.

The fifth column lists those birds that are not listed under Swami (2006), nor seen by me. They were identified by two local, adult, informants³ to whom I showed the illustrations in Grimmett & Inskipp (2005). One would not normally rely on identifications by non-'expert' observers, and indeed a few identifications made were clearly erroneous, for example, the Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*. (Another informant, an experienced hunter, confirmed that this was not correct). However, in view of the paucity of reported observations of the birds of Sirumalai I have considered it worth including these here.

With my own observations, I have indicated with a question mark where identification was uncertain.

Winter visitors are indicated thus: (W).

1 <http://phbws.org/bph.html>; accessed 8 April 2009.

2 <http://www.ecoindia.com/ghats/eastern.html>.

3 Sri B Parthasarathy of Sirumalai Palaiyur, and Sri G Sethuraj of Sirumalai Podur.

Table: Birds of Sirumalai, observed and/or reported 1980 - 2009

Species	Bundell Jan–August 1980	Swami (2006)	Bundell Jan 2009	Parthasarthy & Sethuraj Jan 2009
Indian Pond-Heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i>			S	
Oriental Honey-buzzard <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>			S	
Black-shouldered Kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	S			
Crested Serpent-Eagle <i>Spilornis cheela</i>			S	
Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i>				S
Black Eagle <i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>	S	S	S	
Mountain Hawk-Eagle <i>Spizaetus nipalensis</i>		S		
Common Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			S	
Grey Junglefowl <i>Gallus sonneratii</i>			S	
Indian Peafowl <i>Pavo cristatus</i>			S	
Emerald Dove <i>Chalcophaps indica</i>				S
Mountain Imperial-Pigeon <i>Ducula badia</i>				S
Rose-ringed Parakeet <i>Psittacula krameri</i>	S			
Blossom-headed Parakeet <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>	S			
Blue-winged Parakeet <i>Psittacula columboides</i>		S	S	
Large Green-billed Malkoha <i>Phaenicophaeus tristis</i>		S		
Greater Coucal <i>Centropus sinensis</i>			S	
Mottled Wood Owl <i>Strix ocellata</i>				S
Ceylon Frogmouth <i>Batrachostomus moniliger</i>		S		
Great Eared-Nightjar <i>Eurostopodus macrotis</i>		S		
White-breasted Kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>			S	
Chestnut-headed Bee-eater <i>Merops leschenaulti</i>				S
Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>	S		S	
Brown-headed Barbet <i>Megalaima zeylanica</i>	S		S	
White-cheeked Barbet <i>M. viridis</i>		S	S	
Coppersmith Barbet <i>M. haemacephala</i>	S		S	
Common? / Lesser Golden-backed Woodpecker <i>Dinopium javanense / benghalense</i>	S		S	
Heart-spotted Woodpecker <i>Hemicircus canente</i>				S
Indian Pitta <i>Pitta brachyura</i>				S
Common Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i> (W)			S	
Large Pied Wagtail <i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>				S
Grey Wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> (W)			S	
Scarlet Minivet <i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>	S		S	
Common Woodshrike <i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>	S		S	
Red-whiskered Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i>	S		S	
Red-vented Bulbul <i>P. cafer</i>	S		S	
Asian Fairy Bluebird <i>Irena puella</i>	S		S	
Malabar Whistling-Thrush <i>Myiophonus horsfieldii</i>		S		
Orange-headed Thrush <i>Zoothera citrina</i>	S			
Oriental Magpie Robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i>		S	S	
White-rumped Shama <i>C. malabaricus</i>				S
Indian Robin <i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>			S	
Indian Scimitar-Babbler <i>Pomatorhinus horsfieldii</i>	S			
Jungle Babbler <i>Turdoides striatus</i>	S		S	
Common Tailorbird <i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>				S
Greenish Warbler? <i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i> (W)			S	
Nilgiri Flycatcher <i>Eumyias albicaudata</i>		S		
Grey-headed Flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i> (W)				S

Table: Birds of Sirumalai, observed and/or reported 1980 - 2009

Species	Bundell Jan–August 1980	Swami (2006)	Bundell Jan 2009	Parthasarthy & Sethuraj Jan 2009
Asian Paradise Flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>	S		S	
Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>	S		S	
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch <i>Sitta frontalis</i>	S		S	
Purple-rumped Sunbird <i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>			S	
Oriental White-eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosa</i>	S			
White-throated Munia <i>Lonchura malabarica</i>				S
Spotted Munia <i>L. punctulata</i>	S		S	
Black-headed Munia <i>L. malacca</i>				S
Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>			S	
Black-headed Oriole <i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>		S		
Black Drongo <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	S		S	
Bronzed Drongo? <i>D. aeneus</i>			S	
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo <i>D. paradiseus</i>	S		S	
Ashy Woodswallow <i>Artamus fuscus</i>	S			
Indian Tree Pie <i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	S		S	
House Crow <i>Corvus splendens</i>			S	
Jungle Crow <i>C. macrorhynchos</i>			S	

Comments and comparison: 1980–2009

As an indicator of confidence in the above observations it may be mentioned that all but three of the species listed above, including all those locally reported, also appear in the list of birds of the Palani Hills published by the Palani Hills Birdwatchers Society. This list covers the neighbouring upper and lower Palani Hills but does not include observations from Sirumalai⁴. The three species not mentioned are the Ceylon Frogmouth *Batrachostomus moniliger*, the Great Eared-Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis*, and the Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus nipalensis*, listed by Swami (2006)—all of which could be difficult to distinguish from similar species, which are listed (e.g., the latter from the Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*).

The Malabar Parakeet *Psittacula columboides* and the Nilgiri Flycatcher *Eumyias albicaudata* – reported by Swami – are endemic to the Western Ghats⁵. This emphasises the avifaunal, if not geological, affinity of Sirumalai to this range rather than to the Eastern Ghats.

Unsurprisingly both, House *Corvus splendens*, and Large-billed *C. macrorhynchos* Crows are present in Sirumalai. However, in 1980 there were apparently no crows in the hills, and certainly none in or around the main settlements. This was not only observably true but was also well known to the local people, who held that it would be inauspicious, should a crow appear. Crows of both species were of course common on the surrounding plains at that time.

This is clearly not a complete list of the birds to be found in Sirumalai. Other than where indicated, my own observations are restricted to what I could confidently identify, so that, for example, I have omitted the swifts and martins, which accompanied the Common Swallows daily during my visit in 2009.

In other words, more work remains to be done.

Mammals

Although this is an article on the birds of Sirumalai (in a journal devoted to birds), given the paucity of available information on the fauna of these hills in general, it would seem remiss not to mention the animals observed, although most have been previously reported.

Sirumalai is well known as a home of the endangered Slender Loris *Loris tardigradus lydekkerianus*⁶, which I did not observe, but was reported to me by local informants in 1980. However, in 2009 I did observe another endangered species, which is known to be present in Sirumalai, the Grizzled Giant Squirrel *Ratufa macroura*⁷.

In 1980 I also observed Common Langur *Presbytis entellus*, Bonnet Macaque *Macaca radiata*, and Indian Porcupine *Hystrix indica*, and in 2009, Bonnet Macaque again, as well as Gaur *Bos gaurus*.

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4 Dr A David Ravindran, PHBWS President, personal communication.

5 BirdLife EBA Factsheet 123, Western Ghats <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/ebas/index.html?action=EbaHTMDetails.asp&sid=125&m=0>

6 <http://dindigul.nic.in/forest.htm>

7 ibid