

## Review



### *Birds of Kerala: status and distribution*

by C. Sashikumar, Praveen J., Muhamed Jafer Palot, & P. O. Nameer. 2011.

1st ed. DC Books: Kottayam, Kerala. Pp. 1–835.

Hardback (14.0 x 21.0 cm, with illus. dust cover), seven portraits (various sources), 572 photos (col., by 50 photographers), six maps

(by M. Pradeep Kumar), two text-figs, and 17 tables. Price: Rs. 995/-.

**Contents:** List of Families/Subfamilies in the main list (pp. 6–8); Foreword (pp. 9–10, by Asad R. Rahmani); Preface (pp. 11–12, by authors); Acknowledgements (pp. 13–15); A history of ornithology in Kerala (pp. 16–29); The changing landscape of Kerala (pp. 30–53, by S. Sathis Chandran Nair); Climate of Kerala (p. 54); An overview of the bird communities of Kerala (pp. 55–79); Conservation (pp. 80–87); Map of northern Kerala (p. 80); Map of southern Kerala (p. 81); Site descriptions (pp. 90–108); Species accounts: methodology and notes (pp. 109–119); Species accounts: the main list (pp. 120–708); Map (p. 709); Species accounts: the secondary list (pp. 710–741); Appendix 1: Checklist of the birds of protected areas and reserve forests of Kerala (pp. 742–759); Appendix 2: Survey locations of Salim Ali's Travancore–Cochin survey (pp. 760–767); Appendix 3: Glossary (pp. 768–771); Appendix 4: Useful contacts (p. 772); Bibliography (pp. 773–814); Index of scientific names (pp. 815–819); Index of English names (pp. 820–825); Additional information (pp. 826–835).

Kerala has been lucky in its ornithologists. Perhaps it has something to do with its biogeography, perhaps the unique avifauna such geographical positioning evolves, perhaps an intrinsic desire of its human population to take a serious interest in their surroundings, and document the vicissitudes of avian lives. Kerala seems to be not just 'God's own country,' but the itinerant ornithologists' too, and they flock to it like a mixed feeding party in a forest glade, leaving their best work in their wakes.

Given the substantial documented legacy that pervades Kerala ornithology, it seems to me that the book under review was waiting to be written.

This is not a field guide, though it is replete with bird photographs. This is not a sumptuous handbook of Kerala ornithology, though that should be on the authors' target next. This book perches perfectly on that branch of contemporary ornithology, which intelligently brings together scattered records from various media, be they from published scientific/semi-scientific papers, downloads from the Internet, newspaper reports, or the unpublished personal notes of birdwatchers into a single comprehensive volume. It provides the most pertinent information required by ornithologists, conservationists, administrators, and ecologists—that of the status and distribution of birds within the boundaries of Kerala. And the authors have chosen to pick up the thread of recorded ornithology from where it had run up to in 1993, only they have wisely decided to spread their research over the past three decades, thereby overlapping the period covered by Neelakantan *et al.* (1993), for good measure and thoroughness.

*Birds of Kerala* covers 491 spp. (pp. 11–12), in two lists. The first, Main List, contains 453 taxa, which were recorded in Kerala at least once since 1 January 1975. The second, Secondary List, comprising 49 taxa, contains historical records that do not meet the authors' criteria for inclusion in the Main List.

Species accounts contain English, Malayalam, and scientific names, the serial number from Ripley's *Synopsis* (1982), a photograph of the species, and information under the sub-headings: habitat, status, distribution, breeding, threats and conservation, historical records, and notes.

Three tables try to resolve identification pitfalls of the following difficult groups: pipits (p. 528), *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais* warblers (pp. 618–619), and leaf warblers (pp. 628–629).

The brevity and crispness of writing, the occasional telegraphic notations, the seeming coldness of dates and numbers belie the enormous research that has gone into putting these data together—in the only way possible, through the sparse language that accuracy demands.

Glance at the elaborate detail to methodology and criteria, clearly laid out in the preliminary pages, run your eye through the forty-odd pages of the bibliography, ponder the inclusion of a Secondary List of tentative birds that have been listed historically from Kerala, but for which the authors did not find enough proof to warrant inclusion in their Main List—and you will realise the extent of deep research and consistent scholarship that underlines the entire work.

There needs to be a certain type of commitment, an uncompromising drive, an acuteness of focus to pull off a work of this caliber—and of course, a depth of knowledge, based both, on field work, and the comprehensive overview that a deep study of the published literature provides; to sift the recorded ornithology of the region, winnow the chaff from the grain, pursue every trail to the source. These are indeed driven people, doing consistent, tough, emulatory work. And if one were to stretch a point, they have created a template for ornithologists across India.

Having said that, I would like to point out a few areas that require attention, mainly for two reasons: one, that readers should know the book's shortcomings, and two, they might help make a second edition more accurate.

The book contains 491 spp., divided into 453 in the Main List, and 49 in the Secondary List (pp. 11–12), however, there is a discrepancy in these numbers. Site descriptions given in two tables comprise 126 and 27 sites respectively (pp. 90–108), but the map on p. 103 marks only 21 sites, with the location '2' occurring twice on the map. The authors state that 'the English name is given first together with the Malayalam name in both Malayalam

and Latin script,' (p. 109). However, only the Malayalam script is given; its transliteration into English would be obviously useful. There is a degree of confusion with the way citations are treated in the text and the authors should use a system that differentiates between citations relating to published work, and those referring to anecdotal records, wherein the form of enclosing the author and year within parentheses is used for both. The references section needs proper formatting, and abbreviation of journal titles. This could have reduced the number of pages, and the inevitable carbon footprint that any printed book creates. In a work of this length, typos with regard to scientific nomenclature become a minefield. The authors have dealt admirably with this issue, but I could pick out a few that slipped through at the final stage: *Hirundo smithii filifera* (p. 506), *Motacilla flava similima* (p. 516), *Anthus similis travancoriensis* (p. 524), etc.

Rasmussen & Anderton (2005; 2: 263) list *Alcedo meninting coltarti* from north-eastern India, and *A. m. phillipsi* from southern India and Sri Lanka, whereas the former is named in this work (p. 447). The Forest Wagtail is now included in the genus *Dendronanthus* (p. 511).

I hope care has been taken to tally the subspecific names of taxa not photographed in Kerala, with those used in the text.

And in the next edition I would like to see the names of these four gentlemen appear as authors of the work, and not as its 'editors.'

Ornithology is a dynamic science in a constantly changing, vibrant world of birds, and though the authors modestly deny the 'claim that this document is the final word in Kerala ornithology' (p. 12), to me it will remain so for a long time to come.

– Aasheesh Pittie



### **Birds of Madhya Pradesh**

by Satish Pande, Niranjan Sant, Kailash Chandra, Pramod Deshpande, and Narmada P. Shukla. 2009. Ela Foundation & Madhya Pradesh Council of Science & Technology: Pune. Pp. i–xviii, 1–234.

Paperback (10x18.5 cm), 2 maps, 53 illustrations by 5 illustrators, 409 colour photographs by 36 photographers, and five portraits (colour). Price: not mentioned.

This is a handy photographic guide to the birds of Madhya Pradesh (M.P.). Within its pocket-sized format it packs a great deal of information. The photographs are of a consistently high standard, some even excellent. The cooperation of two organisations in publishing this book is laudable, and I hope it will catalyse the birdwatching fraternity in a region that is rich in its avian diversity, but particularly lacking in contemporary ornithological work.

The preliminary pages (pp. i–xviii) briefly explain about the book, introduce the region it covers, its geology, physiology, climate, forests, biodiversity hotspots, faunal diversity, and historical aspects of its avifaunal documentation. Page xvii has pictures of eight major habitat types found in the region, along with their locations, except for the riverine, and semi-evergreen forest habitats. A division-wise map of M.P. (p. xviii) is helpful, but misses out on a couple of districts that are listed alongside, e.g., Ashoknagar (Gwalior division), and Burhanpur (Indore division).

The authors have quoted several different pertinent works, and stated the number of taxa variously tallied in them, ranging from 469 (p. xv) to 517 (p. xiv); but for this work they consider 417 spp., for Madhya Pradesh, describing and illustrating 407 of which 21 are were either vagrant, or doubtful (p. xv).

The bulk of the work (pp. 1–205) contains photographs and brief accounts of birds, arranged so that two species are shown on each page. The notes comprise English, Hindi, and scientific names, size, information on sexual dimorphism, status, habitat, nest-type, food, identification pointers, and distribution in the divisions of M.P. as delineated in the map on p. xviii. This last is obviously only indicative, as it would be based on published sources.

Without taking away anything from the value of this work, I would like to point out a few things in the interest of accuracy that it otherwise so consistently upholds.

The photographs purportedly illustrating two different taxa on p. 23, namely *Aythya fuligula* and *A. marila*, are both of the former. The occurrence of *Lanius collurio* (p. 147), and *L. tephronotus* (p. 149) in the region needs to be watched carefully.

Some sexually 'dimorphic' taxa are erroneously treated as 'alike': *Ardeotis nigriceps* (p. 62), *Ocyrceros birostris* (p. 116), *Copsychus malabaricus* (p. 159), and *Melophus lathamii* (p. 188). Users of this work should keep in mind that birds of prey are generally considered sexually dimorphic, in that the female is much larger than the male, and invariably differences in the density of plumage markings differ between sexes.

This work follows Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) in matters of taxonomy (p. xi). However, I could spot two taxa that do not conform: *Lanius meridionalis* is treated as *L. excubitor* (p. 148), and *Oriolus kundoo* as *O. oriolus* (p. 200), even though the photograph clearly identifies the former.

This work treats the 'residential status [of birds] as applicable to India' (p. xi). However, at least two taxa are wrongly listed under 'winter visitor' or 'winter migrant' category: *Nettapus coromandelianus* (p. 25), and *Sarkidiornis melanotos* (p. 26).

Some minor factual contradictions have crept into the text: Number of threatened birds shown as '24' on p. vii, but 25 listed on p. 206; '1' biosphere reserve (p. viii), but two listed on p. 208; '45' districts (p. xii) but a count reveals 48 [p. xviii]; Chandra & Singh's paper was published in 2004, not '2006' (p. xv).

There is a useful glossary at the end (pp. 210–211).

– Aasheesh Pittie