

M. Henry in his *Guide to the birds of Ceylon* (1971) provides these names. So it is necessary to redeem these names and bring them back into use. New names may spell disaster. As the saying goes, “Every innovation disturbs more by its novelty than benefits by its utility.”

There have been sporadic attempts at making a checklist of birds with their names in Tamil. M. Krishnan used the traditional names in the Tamil essays he wrote. In 1956 the Government of Tamil Nadu brought out *Kalaikalanjyam*, a ten-volume Tamil encyclopedia. All the entries on birds, by M. Krishnan and P. Bonnel (yes...the ‘Paradise Bird’) had traditional Tamil names. The Tamil names in Salim Ali’s *Book of Indian birds* are replete with errors and even after pointing these out, each new edition carries the same names.

The next attempt was in 1968 when M. A. Badshah of the Indian Forest Service published, through the department, *A checklist of birds of Tamil Nadu*. He records in the preface of the book, “I have been collecting the Tamil names ever since I started service in the early thirties but still I am not satisfied

with the material I have gathered. My ambition was to prepare a more comprehensive list of birds but I feared that life will not allow me to go on indefinitely on this errand and therefore I have decided to publish whatever I have collected and leave the rest to the coming generation.”

How can we carry the message of bird conservation to people unless we retrieve the traditional nomenclature? If a researcher is familiar with these names, then she can delve into ancient or medieval literature and arrive at the provenance of bird species in traditional ethnic literature.

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Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii*: its habitat and origin of name

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Singh, B. 2006. Sirkeer Malkoha *Taccocua leschenaultii*: its habitat and origin of name. *Indian Birds* 2 (6): 180–181.
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Though published in 2004, my copy of *Buceros* (vol. 9 no. 2), devoted exclusively to Aasheesh Pittie’s “A dictionary of scientific bird names originating from the Indian region”, arrived almost a year later. The subject was so well introduced that there was no putting away the slim volume till I read it through, from cover to cover, in one sitting. The background to the origin of most names is fascinating.

But what intrigued me was my name in the list of “acknowledgements” at the end. And with that hangs this tale of unraveling the origin of the name of one Indian bird. Aasheesh had come across the word “Sarkanda” (*Typha angustifolia*) in the text of one of my articles. So he wanted to know all about Sarkanda, especially whether there was any association between Sarkanda and the name “Sirkeer” of a malkoha?

I told Aasheesh about this bush of reeds, each five to eight feet tall, and some 20 to 50 reeds in unison, constituting one unit. In the Punjab of pre-1947, when it comprised the better part of contemporary Pakistan and all of Himachal, Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh, the Sarkanda grew in profusion on the fringes of the sandy beds of rivers and seasonal streams. Now it is a less common sight because of excessive commercial exploitation.

Each reed is topped with a 9 to 12 inches long, delicate, compact and feathery plume. The plume flowers from December to February and when seen on a sunny day and in a gentle breeze, the sight of flowers shimmering like silver tinsel is most attractive. To be standing on a prominence above a riverbed full of the shimmering sea of Sarkanda-in-flower

on a full moon night was an experience fit for the Gods. On a lesser scale and with effort it is there for the taking even now.

During the monsoons, a long and soft green sheath covers each reed. Sarkanda bushes also grew in thick clusters on the banks of agricultural irrigation channels and acted as most effective soil-binders. Among the trees that dotted the banks of these channels were kikar (*Acacia arabica*) and wild date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*). Such a setting was invariably a favorite site for breeding colonies of the weaver birds (Ploceidae). The Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus* and the Crow-pheasant *Centropus sinensis* also favoured the Sarkanda bush, mainly as a roost, though the Black Francolin occasionally also nested in it.

Sarkanda also grew in the Gangetic plain, on the arid fringes of the Thar Desert, and in the foothills and ravines all along the Shivaliks. It formed a thick, continuous belt on either side of the international border with Pakistan from Jammu to Gurdaspur (Punjab) and again in parts of Rajasthan.

Along this border, where human presence was minimal, the Sarkanda jungle was home to a large presence of Grey *F. pondicerianus* and Black Francolin, wild boar *Sus scrofa*, nilgai *Bocelaphus tragocamelus*, golden jackal *Canis aureus* and occasionally an enterprising leopard *Panthera pardus* as well!

In the Jammu–Pathankot region, I had on many an occasion in 1959–1960 and again in 1969–1972 come across the Sirkeer Malkoha around Sarkanda bushes. These observations now stand clearly validated by the distribution maps for this species in Kazmierczak (2000) and Grewal et al. (2002).

When the bush dried up in March–April, the reeds were harvested and used for making stools, easy chairs and screens and mats of varying sizes. The reeds were held in place with strips of unprocessed jute. The finished mats were called “sirkee” and in the plural, “sirkian”. At times these sirkees were even lined with home-spun cotton sheets on one side to make them more durable and effective. In rural homesteads, sirkees were used as curtains on doors, as floor covering and even as space partition screens. They were also used on the floorboard and sides of bullock-carts to prevent the harvested grain from spilling during transportation to the grain markets.

The dictionary text in Pittie (2004) for “Sirkee” (p. 22) also mentions, “*Centropus sirkee* J. E. Gray, 1831 (No locality=Cawnpore)”. And that throws up an interesting hypothesis. Major-General Thomas Hardwicke, F.R.S., F.L.S., retired from the Bengal Presidency Army in 1823 and returned “home”. His was the first comprehensive collection of Indian fauna and flora, which he gifted to The Natural History Museum (British Museum), which displayed it in 1825. He had also prepared in manuscript a book, *Illustrations of Indian Zoology*, which was edited by J. E. Gray (the curator) and published by the museum in two volumes in 1830–1835. To Hardwicke’s title was added a sub-title “Chiefly from the Collection of Maj-General Thomas Hardwicke”.

The General had also gifted all his field notes and his huge collection of paintings, drawings and sketches of natural history objects to the Museum. J. E. Gray, as curator, must have had full access to field notes which probably were the base-line data used by Gray for the description of the Sirkee in 1831?

In all probability, General Harwicke’s entry on the Sirkee must have been from Cawnpore (now Kanpur) for two reasons. Firstly, Kanpur-Allahabad region even now has abundant Sarkanda growth. And secondly, for a while the General was indeed stationed at the Fatehgarh cantonment (still in existence), which today is about an hour’s drive from Kanpur, en route Allahabad.

Incidentally, the General had also made his field notes available to Latham around 1809. Yet no one has either

credited him for the first book on India’s natural history nor as pioneer of Indian natural history, per se. Others even claimed some of his first descriptions of species despite evidence to the contrary in the minutes of the Linnaean Society. My advocacy of this historical injustice is unfortunately seen as one general trying to promote another!

This account will be incomplete without recalling a most unusual encounter I had with one Sirkeer Malkoha. On the second day of the war with Pakistan in December 1971, four Sabre jets of the P.A.F. targeted the only bridge over the Chenab River at Akhnoor (on the Jammu–Poonch road) at about 15:30 hrs. I was mid-way on the bridge, when rockets and bombs straddled it. A few very close misses! We sped away the fastest we could and on exiting the bridge, drove the jeep into the first available depression off the road beam.

The idea was to abandon the jeep and get as far away from it as possible. For having missed the prime target, the P.A.F. pilots would next take an easy, sitting duck such as a jeep, strafing it with machine guns. So the driver and I, leaping from the jeep, ran towards a clump of Sarkanda bushes some 50 m away. Once inside, I came to an abrupt halt (the driver almost knocking me over) because a Sirkeer Malkoha was understandably, terribly agitated when I dislodged him from his mid day roost, and in such unseemly haste!

Though mortally scared of the Sabres still circling overhead, I burst out laughing as I saw that Malkoha taxi away and take off in the bid, “everyone for himself”. My driver was puzzled at my mirth, when in fact we both were in blue funk!

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Book reviews

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Birdsong: A natural history by Don Stap, Scribner (publ.), 261 pages, \$16.00 Hard cover.

No sound of nature has captured man’s ear and soul as much as birdsong. Whether it is the twittering of a chipping sparrow or the ethereal fluty whistles of a hermit thrush, birdsongs have made humans pause and reflect with awe over the millennia. Poets over the ages have waxed eloquent on these avian virtuosos, but only recently have these sounds been examined from the objective perspective of scientists.

For the past fifty-odd years, birdsongs have been a favorite field of study for many competent field biologists. However, the cornucopia of information revealed from their enquiries is largely locked away in scientific journals or in erudite ornithological tomes and thus is veiled from the public eye.

Don Stap’s *Birdsong* brings this finally within the purview of the amateur naturalist and backyard birdwatcher. Even those who are not scientifically inclined would benefit from this book’s ability to present the science of birdsong in more easily readable prose.

What makes birds sing? What is unique about their anatomy that enables them to sing? Has birdsong evolved to attract mates or to delineate territories? Is the song learned after hatching or is it innately programmed in the genes? Do birds of the same kind establish a social hierarchy based on their singing prowess and repertoires? Why don’t all birds sing? How did songbirds evolve? These are some of the many fascinating questions that are addressed in this book.