

BIRD WATCHING IN C.F.T.R.I CAMPUS

With natural habitats disappearing in countrysides, gardens and parks are becoming refuge for many woodland species of birds. The gardens and the parks in the city are small islands of woods. C.F.T.R.I campus is a sort of mix of garden and park where birds have been found in fairly large numbers. In such an environment one can almost come in contact with nature everyday and experience the joy of self - discovery.

The mansion, built in Baroque style and looking resplendent in yellow ochre, stands at the highest elevation of the landscape. The ledges of the mansion provide roosting and nesting places for the feral Blue Rock Pigeons which are found hovering around it with their deep gootr-goo, gootr-goo notes. The roads leading to various blocks and residences loop around this stately building. It is surrounded by 100 acres of land, which is left untouched and it provides plenty of cover to the avian neighbours. The cultivated garden in the front together with the built area occupies comparatively a small portion of the total ground. Within last 25 to 30 years of its occupation by the premiere laboratory, a large area was left unexploited giving rise to natural growth of vegetation. To this varied landscape is added the rambling hedgerows and private gardens interspersed with buildings and thickets. Such growth is an open invitation to a large number of insect species like grasshoppers, crickets and other gramnivorious insects. The soil is perennially covered by the grasses which grow luxuriantly. The leaf fall from the deciduous trees during winter, and aftermath of cut and dried grasses, provide rich food for fungi and ants and many other insects which can be seen swarming all around. The leaf litter

found under the trees and hedges shelter a large number of bugs and beetles. The moths though not butterflies, deposit their eggs among the succulent leaves with multicolored caterpillars among the garden plants. With such plethora of insect life there is very abundance of food especially for the passerine birds.

Since the estate was handed over to house CFTRI in 1952, lot of changes have taken place; the built area has increased. A mixture of natural and cultivated trees has occupied the campus, that is sprawling over hundred acres of land. A lot of shrubbery is growing along the rows of residential areas and the area is parceled out into boulevards, orchards and lawns. This manmade mosaic invites a large number of woodland birds in and out of season. The whole campus acts like a supermarket for bird populations in the environment of Mysore city.

BIRD LIFE

While entering through the main gate you may witness the antics of the Roller or Blue Jay, with brilliant display of blue bands in flight. It is a beauteous bird and chosen as the Bird of Karnataka. It feasts on insects, pouncing on them from a vantage point. Because of its blue throat it is considered as incarnation of Siva. A little further, on way to the main building, a group of snowwhite little Egrets with black spear like bill will be seen stealthily advancing to pick up insects from the well watered lawns. During early periods, their lacy plumes were in great demand by milliners for adorning women's hats in Europe and America. They were slaughtered ruthlessly almost to extinction. Luckily change in women's fashion has saved them from complete extermination. A funny Spotted Owlet may be

seen staring at you from the hollow of the large peepal tree. The ledges of the building provide a sanctuary for hundreds of Blue Rock Pigeons. The swifts too have found a refuge there. The pigeons are seen whirling round the building only to return hurriedly to their perch. On way to the Southern gate, concealed in the leafy branches of the groves of copper pods, will be noticed a lonely hawk, called Shikra, lying in wait for its prey which include young ones of birds.

Along the culvert, on way to school, lurks the Whitebreasted Waterhen. It harbours along the marshy area with its family. Among the thickets bordering the Nullah and a patch of woodland behind the bungalows, I have hardly noticed any birds. Most of the varieties of birds I have noted are amongst the residential area behind the main building. Here, small flocks of crows abound. They are not the familiar House Crows with grey neck, but glossy jet black Jungle Crows. This is very intriguing indeed. Again, they have outcompeted the common House Sparrow from the human dwellings. Here and there, on open grounds, Mynahs are seen loitering and noisily hopping. In the spring the area reverberates with kuoo-kuoo, the call of the male Koel. It starts with low call reaching crescendo and breaks abruptly; it starts all over again monotonously. It is almost enchanting music heard at the break of the day from spring to pre-monsoon showers. Large flocks of Roseringed Parakeets, using campus as stopover, zoom across screaming noisily, keeak, keeak, keeack. The Pond Heron wearing its maroon breeding coat, and found singly, is watching patiently for its favourite quarry --- the frogs. From nearby tall copper pods, we hear Kutroo - Kutroo, the call of the Crimson Barbet which is often mistaken for woodpecker. In the bushes and the hedgerows are the flowerpeckers and

warblers. Warblers are busily searching for insect larvae, constantly cocking their slender tail and uttering tee tee from time to time. Around the residential quarters, you find many other birds such as Hoopoes flashing their hood, Minivets, with their beautiful scarlet colouring, and Common Brown Babblers rummaging through the litters on the ground searching for their prey. We are greeted by the joyful calls of the celebrated songster, the Redvented Bulbul. The Crested Sepoy Bulbul makes its frequent appearance. Bulbuls are fond of gardens. If you are lucky you may notice a pair of Golden Orioles among leafy trees. The Green Bee - eaters line themselves on over-head wires, often seen hacking their prey or gliding back to their base. The Crow Pheasant are heard making deep resonant call, coop-coop-coop, repeated quickly. They are closely related to cuckoos, and are considered auspicious if one comes across them. The Spotted Dove enters your residence and nests in the verandah in some nook. Its calls kroo-kruk-krukroo...kroo-kroo – kroo, are often heard over long distances.

One hears cheerful towit towit notes of the Tailorbird among the shrubs and bush trees. One of the best songsters is the Magpie Robbin. Mornings are filled with its sweet songs. During breeding season, you may hear its plaintive notes. “Did-he-do-it”, call of Red Wattled Lapwing is very common. Lapwings are seen often in pair. Perhaps it is the only bird in the campus breeding in the open ground. I found its four stone coloured mottled eggs near the Technology Block. The old banyan and peepal trees are fond haunts of the fruit eating Common Grey Hornbill. Small parties fly in glidingly from tree to tree in follow my leader fashion. I have never been able to see, in spite of my careful search, their unique nest in which breeding female is imprisoned. You may also hear the chattering song of

Whitebreasted Kingfisher seen with its brilliant turquoise blue coloured feathers and with a long red beak. It is not necessarily confined to water, as it feeds on terrestrial insects too.

The Purple Sunbird makes its clumsy pendulous nest right in your garden or inside your house. You will see pairs with distinct colouration. Besides you come across many other varieties of woodland birds, the larks, drongos, wagtails, munias, minivets, Grey Tit, and raptors. Small parties of White Ibis are seen occasionally mingled with Egrets.

Birds are driven by their appetite, perching places, suitable nesting sites, and mixed vegetation. *Correlation will be found with the type of vegetation* The vegetation in the campus is of secondary type and it provides less habitable sites for birds. Their density depends on these factors. As there are no suitable nesting places, we do not come across resident birds, except Blue Rock Pigeons. The birds sneak in from outside *on a brief visit,* mainly for feeding. But it is still a wonder that within 100 acres, I could come across 53 species of birds belonging to 32 families.

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From 1986 onwards, I have made several tours around the campus on weekends to study the birds. I have tried to focus attention on their association with the background. So far as illustrations are concerned, one will find excellent coloured plates in Salim Ali's "The Book of Indian Birds". The real joy will be in watching them yourself; all you need is a binocular and a guide. There are many more fascinating facts of birdlife awaiting your discovery.

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