



THE BIRDS OF BOGDA

- Lt Cdr Ninad Phatarphekar

*“Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the skylark sing ;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning !
“And now’t was like all instruments,
Now like a lonely flute ;
And now it is an angel’s song,
That makes the heavens be mute”*

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

It is indeed very peculiar, how a change of scene generates a fresh interest in the more discernible things in our life. Busy city dwellers are left with hardly any time to have a closer look at the bounties of nature, even in their own back yard. From the hustle bustle of Mumbai, when I first arrived in Goa to take up a new appointment, I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a Red Vented bulbul and a White eared one. Frankly, I did not have either the time or the inclination to care. But far from the madding crowd, in the pristine surroundings of the unit, located at a place called Bogda, I could not help but notice the babel of varied bird calls, as I stepped out each day, for my early morning stroll. Each day, a different

note would attract my attention and slowly I found an interest being kindled. I then brought what every bird watcher worth his BNHS membership zealously keeps next to his binoculars; 'The Book of Indian Birds' authored by Dr Salim Ali.

Thus began my expedition of discovery, as I set about identifying the different species, I came across. As an uninitiated amateur bird watcher, each new sighting was sheer enchantment and I would quickly try and match the specimen with the picture in the venerated book. But that was easier said than done. I, for all my aspirations couldn't tell the difference between a fulvous or a ferruginous throated babbler or the fine distinction in colour that separated a rosy minivet from a scarlet one. Confused as I was with the vicereine semantics, I gradually evolved my own methodology, which basically draws parallels with common place things totally unconcerned with ornithology. I have used these same metaphors in relating the birds that have been sited and randomly frequent the area inside the unit.

At the apex of the pyramidal pecking order were a colony of majestic Tawny Eagles. These huge birds reminded me of the gigantic jumbo jets, which would routinely ply from the nearby Dabolim airport. Considering the huge size of the birds, it is a wonder that they can fly. But just a few flaps of their powerful wings was enough to make them airborne and remain that way slowly describing converging concentric circles, on the lookout for creepy crawlies that are abundantly available in this vast area.

A distant cousin of the eagle was a bird identified as the Brahminy Kite. Slightly smaller in size and bright rusty red in colour, with a contrasting white head, neck and breast. The bird was very remarkable in appearance, as if it had worn a three piece suit. This bird too would describe concentric circles, which would be abirritated by a lethal swoop on some

unsuspecting hapless prey on the ground.

While drawing parallels with aircraft, I couldn't help but note the small Blue Kingfisher, a dapper little bird of the most brilliant fluorescent blue & green plumage and rust coloured underparts, the bird is characterised by a Pinocchio like pointed bill and to me it appeared like a sleek Sea Harrier plane as it darted swiftly from one corner of its beat to an another.

A very distinguished looking bird that I frequently came across was the Blackdrongo. A slim and agile, flossy black bird with a long deeply forked tail, it gave me the impression of having adorned a tuxedo, like a gentleman in a English country home. The bird for all its silken grace was a voracious hunter, swooping down to pick up small insects on the ground.

Another bird that was abundantly seen was the small Bee-eater. A dainty bird, shimmering grass green in colour tinged, with reddish brown on the head and neck, it would appear as if it had applied make up, much like a Japanese Geisha girl, as it was preening itself on the overhead telegraph wires. But for all its apparent toilette, it would launch aerial sallies after bees, dragon flies and the likes, snapping them up in its bill and circling back gracefully on its out stretched motionless wings to perch and swallow the prey.

Continuing the topic of colourful birds, a bird very singular in appearance that caught my eye was the Common Hoopoe. A fawn coloured bird with black and white zebra markings on its back, wings and tail. It was also distinguished by a fan shaped crest and a long gently curved beak. The most fascinating aspect of this avian equivalent of the zebra was its call, a soft musical penetrating hoo-po-po repeated intermittently.

A very unique bird call drew my attention, one fine day. I heard a shrill 'de -he- do - it' and I for once did a double take. Till date , I knew only of



parrots & mynas talking. This originator of 'ded - he - do - it' turned out to be a Red Wattled Lapwing, an extremely colourful bird with a bronze brown above and white below, with black breast, head and neck capped with a crimson fleshy wattle in front of each eye. The bird was a street fighter to the core, picture Shahrukh Khan in Josh, earrings et al. This bird would fiercely guard its territory and would not hesitate to take on bigger adversaries like the eagle and chase them away. On one occasion, I even saw it chase away a dog from its nest.

Occasional visitors to the area were the Common Wood Shrike and the Greater Coucal. The Common Wood Shrike is a plain greyish brown bird, with a dark stripe below the eye. It would appear as if, the bird had donned an eye mask like the Phantom, as it would hunt amongst the foliage for moths, beetles, caterpillars and the likes. Whereas, the Greater Coucal is a clumsy, glossy, black bird with conspicuous chestnut wings and a long broad, black graduated tail. It would appear as if the bird had wrapped a chestnut coloured blanket, as it staked the under growth. At frequent intervals, it would give a deep resonant coop - 'coop-coop' call. At night, it would not be uncommon to spot a couple of barn owls perched

on the telephone cables, as if in deep thought about affairs, parliamentary.

These birds brought me much joy in my morning and evening walks and I would always be on the lookout for a new species, which I would then note down and try to identify. These sightings soon metamorphosed into a full time obsession. My attention, soon spread to other surrounding areas and I discovered a virtual treasure trove of migratory birds at Mangor lake near Mangor Hill, a stone throw away from INS Gomantak. Birds like the Purple Moorhen, Cotton Teal, Common Teal, Coot and Bronze Winged Jacana would frequent the place. In the course of time, I identified almost 25 species, amongst them were the Indian Robin, White Eared Bulbul, Common Myna, Little Green Heron, Wire tailed Swallow, Small Sunbird, Changeable hawk eagle amongst others.

These winged wonders amply emphasised the wonderful bounty of Mother Nature, that is there for all of us to partake and savour. So next time you are in Goa, pack a pair of binoculars along with the swimming trunks and take time off to look at all things bright and beautiful and creatures, great and small. After all there is more to Goa than just the sea, sun and the sand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cdr NP Phataphekar (51187-H) was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 10 Nov 89. He has served as DLO onboard Vidhyagiri and he is presently serving in ND (Mb).

