

*The Good Companions
Birds of Kipling Camp - Christmas 2013*

By Gillian Wright

The shuttered darkness of our cottage and the lingering warmth of the swaddled hot water bottle beneath my toes made it seem like the middle of the night. Suddenly from somewhere nearby a red jungle fowl began to crow. He was joined by a brain-fever bird or common hawk-cuckoo, doing everything it could to make its usually manic call if not exactly dulcet, then more of a subdued, descending alaap. It must be light outside. I pulled on a firan and my woolly cap with its white snowflake pattern and stepped out on to the verandah.

It was light. The jungle was a picture of stillness, with just the sound of slow-dropping dew, and falling dry leaves. But within this peaceful landscape, where even now I could discern several cheetal (spotted deer) and a troop of langur, their long tails hanging down like old-fashioned bellpulls, there must be birds, and lots of them.

The Christmas birds at Kipling are not however keen on early rising. I wandered slowly down to the pond. The bare tree at the end of the bandh betrayed a slight movement. A black drongo flew in with a cocky flick of its tail, followed by a stoutish grey bird with a strong bill - the large cuckoo-shrike - and shortly afterwards a liquid 'whip-or-will' announced the arrival of a black-hooded oriole. They sat soaking in the first rays of the rising sun. Against the light I could see the flitting silhouettes of warblers of the western Palaearctic giving two-tone calls. Suddenly a tailorbird burst into its loud, insistent dee-wits as it busied its way through the lantana beside me.



Black-hooded oriole

The sunlight gradually worked its way down to the rich, loose, leaf litter of the forest floor. Between the lantana bushes on the far side of the fire line a red jungle cock - presumably the author of the early morning crowing -



Red jungle fowl

walked back and forth conscious of maintaining his dignity as he searched for his breakfast. Beyond, the single drongo had been joined by more drongos, and the cuckoo-shrike by another cuckoo-shrike. The cuckoo-shrikes were parsimonious with their loud ringing calls, but the drongos more than made up for that. They embarked on an avian

opera with a rich variety of voices, from the whistling to the metallic. Melody, squeaks, percussion - they were all fused into a spellbinding performance. At first I imagined I was witnessing something totally rare and unique, but I soon realised that for Kipling Camp this was the daily, in fact often all-day entertainment. It was a travelling theatre, or rather circus, as the music was matched by endless displays of aerial acrobatics, from treetops to forest floor.

Most spectacular were the greater racquet-tailed drongos with their floating tails, and iridescent crests and ruffs, most numerous the black drongos with the diagnostic spots by their beaks, and most intriguing their white-bellied cousins. Apart from the cuckoo-shrikes, themselves no slouches at high-speed low-flying manoeuvres, they were joined by other species. Permanent companions were rufous treepies, bold and beautiful with magpie chatter and bell-like calls. Two orioles kept fairly high in the trees, occasionally nabbing a fat caterpillar. I saw one bird whacking a particularly large and hairy one against a branch before swallowing it in three gulps. Black-rumped flamebacks worked up the trunks probing with their bills both the bark fissures, and the hearts of curled up leaves hanging close to the trunks that must have contained insects. At one point a racquet-tailed drongo decided to have some fun teasing a flameback. It forced the woodpecker from the tree and they seemed to spar in mid-air before the woodpecker retreated.



Greater racquet-tailed drongo



Orange-headed ground thrush

Meanwhile other parts of the jungle were livening up. A spectacular male white-naped woodpecker was noisily debarking a dead tree. In the leaf litter there was a frenzied rustling in one particular area just across the fireline. Through my binoculars I first saw two white-throated thrushes with their zebra throats, blue backs and deep orange breasts. They were attacking the leaf litter but they were not alone. A slightly smaller bird was practically buried in leaves and thrashing them about energetically. It took some time to get a good look at him. Could it be the same creature that had given me the run-around in Assam, hiding in bamboo thickets at Wild Grass? I saw the russet brown head, the soft, milky white throat, feathers gently puffed, the spotted breast, the strong bill. Yes! This was my old friend and champion skulker the puff-throated babbler. And very happy I was to renew our acquaintance.

But, as they say in the Upanishads 'neti, neti' - this was not all. More was to come. Upstaging the white-throated thrushes were some other thrushes, not so colourful but in greater number. Upright and bouncy they too were rifling the insect life in the leaf litter. One was grey with striking yellow bill and legs, the others a uniform brown, with a very attractive patch of artwork under their chins. Not to be left out a magpie robin and a pair of Indian robins waded in, while just above them in the low bushes, sat a stunning deep blue flycatcher with a pointed head, and a neat black gorgette. I took a few steps forward and the grey and brown thrushes decamped to perches high in the trees.



Black-naped monarch

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Returning to the centre of the camp, Charles confirmed that the flycatcher was indeed a black-naped monarch and showed me a picture of a Tickell's thrush that didn't look anything like the birds I had seen. Inskipp & Inskipp's illustrations did however do them justice. When Anne heard what I'd seen she remarked, 'Oh yes, this is a great place for Tickell's thrushes'. She was right. Every day, as it grew warmer and presumably the insects more active, they and the white-throated t.s hopped around the camp careless of the humans a few feet away. Sometimes they were joined by the army of jungle babblers that creaked and chorused all around.

I soon found that the monarchs were not the only flycatchers inhabiting Kipling camp. Tickell's f.c.s with their lovely blue and orange livery also could be seen in the lantana above foraging thrushes. In the woodland towards Belinda's house I saw singly both male and female verditer f.c.'s while ubiquitous were the red-breasted f.c.'s with their staccato 'chip' calls and their white-edged flicking tails. A straw poll seemed to indicate there were more males (with the red-breast) than females (plain). Generally at a greater height in the branches and also in good numbers was everybody's favourite the grey-headed canary f.c. with its inviting call 'Two more for tea'. Often I saw these in the company of other f.c.'s, for example a pair of monarchs below a grey-headed f.c. in the same tree.



Grey-headed canary flycatcher

Kipling's farmhouse adds another dimension to the birdlife of the camp - the agricultural, the place where the forest meets the fields. Following the path towards the farmhouse I noted a scarlet minivet and his golden missus, who perched briefly on a treetop before heading off towards the forest. A grey hornbill preceded me in dipping flight. Within sight of the farmhouse, in a young but thickly foliated tree there was a great deal of

leaf movement and fluttering. I glimpsed a white eyebrow here and a black wing there. It took at least ten minutes for the whole bird to appear, sit on a twig, have a quick wash and brush up, and then head off with its partner. Two common woodshrikes.

Another commotion in the leaves overhead, and then the yellow-ringed eye, streaked head and spotted shoulder of the brown barbet appeared. About two feet from the ground in a bush the shivering tail of a male black redstart caught my eye. A hoopoe probed what seemed very hard earth, while a male stonechat was on sentry duty atop the hedgerow. Three days running I saw it in virtually the same position. From the direction of the village came the rhythmic 'pop-pop-pop' of a coppersmith.



Tickell's blue flycatcher

The late afternoon provided the richest pickings around the farmhouse.



Small green bee-eater

For one thing the sun was in the right position shining into the hedgerows. The light was excellent, and the birds after a lunchtime lull provided plenty of action. Small green bee-eaters used the dead trees beyond as bases for their aerial gliding, and plum-headed parakeets and long-billed crows found them perfect perches. Occasionally cattle egrets and pond herons used them too, while a red-naped ibis was settled on the summit of a spreading peepul tree beyond.

Spotted doves favoured the wires stretching across the fields, as did red-rumped swallows (a flock of around 10 birds turned up one day) and I am pretty sure there were a couple of chestnut-shouldered petronias, or as Salim Ali called them much more conveniently, yellow-throated sparrows.

A word here about the local house sparrows that are as chirpy and lovable as house sparrows are everywhere. The males have exceptionally smart black bibs. In the early morning they can be found sunning themselves on the high branches of the dead trees - not at least what I would expect. Then they can be found hopping around in the dust at the side of the road, and around the shops but by late afternoon they have congregated in a particularly thick stand of one of the smaller kinds of bamboo that lies to the right of the path between the farmhouse and the main village. In the depths of the bamboo they chatter away, and sometimes hop out to reveal themselves.



Scaly-breasted munia

The empty paddy fields beside the farmhouse still had something to offer even though the paddy was long cut leaving just the roots and shorn clumps of dry straw. On two days I found a small flock of scaly-breasted munias, male and female, gleaning the fields, and on two occasions the same group of three crested buntings - one deep black male with his spike of rufous crest and two brown females.

I was distressed though by the lack of some species that I would have expected and which have already been decimated in Delhi due to the loss of habitat and prevalence of pesticides. I decided to choose one of the missing families and go to look for them. I chose shrikes. Since I had seen none in the park, and none in the camp so far, I decided to search the hedgerows around and beyond the farmhouse. In theory they would provide excellent shrike perches.

In the hedgerows closest to the farmhouse I came across a very friendly plain prinia who examined me at close quarters. I returned the compliment. These unspectacular birds have a rare and delicate beauty - the buff and white breast, bright red eyes beneath a pale supercilium, the long tail. They used to populate the junglier parts of Humayun's Tomb in Delhi - but no longer. More at ease with humans I find is the ashy prinia. One was perched atop another hedgerow waving its long, narrow tail from side to side and singing its sawing song at the top of its voice. The stonechat was there but no shrikes.

I turned left before I reached the village and walked through the stunted flame of the forest trees. Indian and magpie robins, common and pied mynahs (aka starlings) and hosts of bubbling red-vented bulbuls but no shrikes. Climbing over the field ridges I headed towards the land behind the Bagh Haveli. Here was a whole line of fields with scrub behind it. The loosely woven hedgerows were like multi-storey flats for birds. Hopping in and out were yet more bulbuls. A flock of Brahminy mynahs (aka starlings) flew up from the dry paddy and distributed themselves among the hedgerows, popping in and out as if playing hide and seek. The reddening light accentuated their black topknots and peach-rufous plumage. Suddenly a flock of about 30 Chesnut-tailed starlings wheeled overhead, settled in a tree-top for a minute or two, then wheeled again before landing in a young tree in the hedgerow and then dispersing to join the Brahminies and bulbuls in their game of hide and seek. I took my glasses off to wipe them and while thus momentarily blinded I blurrily glimpsed a creature that might have a black eye stripe drop from a perch to the ground. I hurriedly replaced my glasses but the bird was gone. Had I imagined it? Had it been a shrike?



Long tailed shrike

Climbing a particularly steep field boundary, I paused to scan the line of hedgerows. Suddenly to my left I saw it. Sleek, the broad black eye stripe, like a bandit, the grey head and back fading to rufous, the pale breast and rufous flanks, a rounded belly. I breathed a sigh of relief, felt a stab of joy. Here was my old friend, a former resident of central Delhi, the long tailed shrike. I soaked in his presence; he watched the ground on the other side of the hedgerow. He dived, disappeared from view and did not return to his perch.

I continued my walk, joined by a herds lady with a flock of a dozen or so small goats. She squatted and watched me and the goats. I watched the hedgerows. One pale-breasted bird a few feet from the ground

caught my eye. The shrike was back. Or was it? I lifted my binoculars. This bird was a shrike, but it was slimmer than the long-tailed and its rear half was distinctly brown - no grey, no rufous. This was undoubtedly a brown shrike. And this for me was thrilling, because brown shrikes in my experience had never been common in Delhi and I have had little chance to see them. I watched it for five or six minutes before it too took a dive and did not return to its perch.

By now a series of cheetal alarm calls had sounded in the jungle beyond and I thought it politic to return. I strode back towards the farmhouse, only pausing for a few minutes to have a good look at some yellow-breasted warblers with pale legs and prominent yellow superciliums that were foraging in a hedgerow. I had seen others of their type in the trees. I am very hesitant as regards warblers and need badly to brush them up, but still I would put a pile of money on them being Tickell's leaf warblers. Busy man Tickell - thrushes, flycatchers, warblers.



Cheetal

As I reached the farmhouse something small, round and brown whirred up from near my right foot and disappeared into the bushes. 'My God,' I thought that was well camouflaged.' Every morning I had heard grey francolins (partridges) calling but this was smaller. I looked at the path before me. Such a shame I missed seeing it properly. Then I took another step

and another whirring brown ball of feathers took to the air. There had been two, and they were quails. That much I could say.

There were many alarm calls over Christmas at Kipling, and many attempts at camera trapping big cats. By the time we left langur, cheetal and I had been camera trapped, but no tigers or leopards.

There are of course many other birds at Kipling at Christmas tide. By the pond, surrounded by deer slots, I found red-wattled lapwing and white wagtails, while a white-throated kingfisher kept watch and occasionally flew over showing off its blue wings. Craning one's head skywards could be uncomfortable, but only then could I see the gold-fronted leafbirds among the highest thick foliage, the softly whistling yellow-legged green pigeons, or a pair Brown capped pygmy woodpeckers working their way around a lofty dry branch. Not far from them was the bright chestnut-bellied nuthatch. Some birds of course are very difficult to miss. The booming calls of the camp's greater coucal advertised it's presence and it strode and flapped lazily around the camp.



Gold fronted leafbird

As every day was throwing up new birds, there must have been many more still waiting to be seen. For example I still had to see the nightjars, the owl that eats the pigeons, the pied kingfishers at the pond and the ioras. There is much to remember and much to return for.

And to anyone I would say that the best Christmas present of all is a Christmas at Kipling Camp, of which the birds of Kipling form only one part, but for me a deeply satisfying one.