

Terror from the Skies

I know the Peregrine as an enemy, whose vivid dark appearance in the sky has often meant death to my stock. When I was a boy and fancied Tumblers, I have seen Peregrines take the pick of my kit high up in the heavens; and afterwards, when I turned to Homers, they killed my young birds right over the loft. Over many years of pigeon keeping, in many places, I have learned to recognize the natural foes of the birds and to guard against them. A good loft and the native wariness of pigeons do much to minimise the risk from vermin and predatory creatures. The danger is when they are in the air: only their wings and wits can save them then.

There are other birds of prey, hawks and hawk-eagles and eagles. The larger of these are rare near town and city, and Homers crossing countryside fly direct and fast and get through. Pigeons have little to fear from the short-winged hawks, because they are such fine fliers and even the Goshawk does not care for the sustained pursuit of a fast-flying quarry that takes to the air. It is only the Peregrine (and its cousin, the smaller but no less deadly Shahin) that will enter into a relentless chase and claim its victim by sheer superiority of flight.



No bird is better equipped for rapine. The Peregrine is so compactly built and balanced that its power and reach are not apparent in repose. See it strike down its prey in the air, and you will have witnessed one of the most impressive sights in nature. The close-flying kit of Tumblers you are watching breaks suddenly, and the birds fly wildly, with the speed and dispersal of terror. High above them you can see a slaty grey speck that circles lower, inexorably, effortlessly. The pigeons are too high up to seek the refuge of roof or loft, and the scatter-brained birds make no attempt to fly away in a bee-line—perhaps that would be futile, with the falcon's far swifter speed (reckoned at 180 m.p.h. by competent observers!).

Then the Peregrine descends on its victim in a breath-taking stoop, wings held pressed against its sides, diving sheer through the thin, hissing air with incredible velocity. The

murderous talon of its hind toe strikes with the rending force of all that momentum and nicely calculated aim, killing instantly. The sound of the impact as it hits its quarry can be heard two furlongs away, and at times the pigeon's head is severed cleanly, as if cut with a knife.

Rarely does the falcon miss its aim, and when it does it zooms up to the clouds, or climbs on quick-beating wings, and resumes the chase. I have seen Tumblers escape with minor injuries, though. In particular I remember a Tumbler that jinked (yes, Tumblers can jink in the air) from under the claws of doom. The Peregrine clutched sideways at it, and for a split second I thought my bird was lost—then it flew clear, and the falcon unclenched its talons to release a floating shower of long feathers. That pigeon had escaped, like Tam O'Shanter's mare, with the loss of its tail!



Only after seeing the awe-inspiring spectacle of a Peregrine's stoop do you realise how perfectly the bird is made for slaughter. The big head and thick-muscled, heavy breast are suited ideally to aid the headlong impetus of its stoop, the long, curved toes can clutch and grasp killingly when the rending stroke of the hind claw cannot be used, and the long, tapering wings and full tail help in its superlative mastery of the air. Add to these an utterly fearless temperament, fierce skill, and real versatility and you have an idea of the Peregrine's equipment for its life.

Hunting birds that fly comparatively low, like Homers, the Peregrine adopts different methods. It takes Homers when they are circling to gain height or when young birds are flying exuberantly around the loft. It does not make its attack from high up then, but steals in sideways and makes a dash at its quarry from near, like a short-winged hawk. Only, its speed on flapping wings over the brief distance is amazing, and it



by M. KRISHNAN

flies in from a slightly higher level, slanting down diagonally for the strike. The sound of the impact as the Peregrine closes in testifies to the velocity with which it strikes, even on such raids, but the prey is rarely killed outright. It is killed soon enough, though, with a quick squeeze of the talons. The victims escape with injuries more frequently in such low-level hunting and if it misses the falcon does not, usually, persist in the attack—this is strangely similar to the behaviour of short-winged hawks when they miss, and the hunting is also similar to their methods. Perhaps the ease with which the fugitives find cover, close to the earth, has something to do with the matter.



Of course it is not only pigeons that the Peregrine hunts. It hunts in the air, and can kill practically any bird of its size or a little larger, at times much larger birds. Strong-flying birds that keep at a fair height in the air often fall a prey to it. The Rose-ringed Parakeet is often taken, and, occasionally, the crow. The Peregrine has a partiality for water and the seacoast, and many water birds are among its victims. It is a great wanderer, as its name implies, and has a world-wide range. The Americans call it the Duck Hawk, and even here that name has validity, for the Peregrine comes to us in the cold weather, in the wake of migrating duck. How I wish it would merit the name more literally, and confine itself solely to duck!

Country Notebook

Voice Of Spring

FOR the past week it has rained steadily and drearily each evening and night in Madras. The summer, which stayed with us till last month, is definitely spent now. Spring begins, in these parts, with the middle of summer (about mid-April) and ends with it—all around, the soggy earth, the clammy air, and the trees which have returned to a vegetative phase, bear ample witness to the end of spring. But the voice of spring is still with us. Every morning the turbulent, fervid calls of the koels announce the dawn, and throughout the day, and even late into the night when there is a moon, the birds are to be heard. Two pairs of house-crows are building their nests in trees near my house, and from this fact, and from the constant presence of koels in the neighbourhood, I infer that the vernal urge still lingers here, wet though it is.

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The koel is associated with spring inseparably in every Indian language. No bird has its voice more celebrated in romantic literature. There are other songsters in our country with more musical natures and more melodious throats, many others. I have heard the Shama and the Racket-tailed Drongo in the same patch of forest; sweet, rich, liquid melody poured out in passionate song, and the Drongo's high, clear greetings to the sun. The Magpie Robin, Laughing Thrushes, and the Pied Wagtail, familiar birds all, have exceptional musical gifts and sing freely and charmingly. The skylark's fragile, pure voice comes down on field and fallow land in the countryside, the Fantail Flycatcher sings its tinkling little song in mango groves, and even the homely Bush Chat, sitting atop one's gate, is capable of a wild, welling, joyous melody. How is it that in a land where such birds abound, the koel, musically far less accomplished, has had its voice so celebrated?

The answer lies in the association between koel and spring, and love and spring. Surely it is not musical virtuosity that typifies spring, but a certain restless-

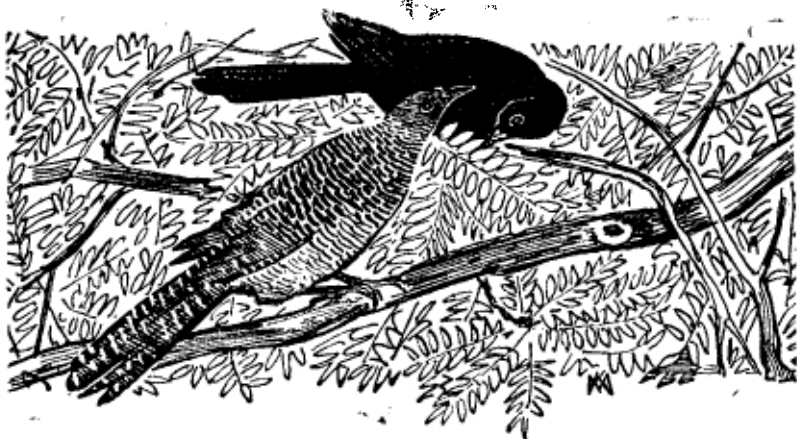
by

M. KRISHNAN

ness of body and mind, a fevered burgeoning of the spirit. The cock koel's loud, mellow crescendo of kuil-kuil-kuil-kuil-kuil and the hen's torrent of kekarees and kiks, and the many abrupt, startled calls that follow the passage of both birds from tree-top to tree-top, have that quality of unrest and disquiet that permeates the air in spring. And in the persistence of its calls from dawn till darkness, and during the enervating heat of noon when all other life is silent, the voice of the koel further echoes vernal unrest. No wonder, then, that it has been so unanimously recognized and acclaimed as the voice of spring. However, romantic poetry seems to know the black cock koel only—the barred and mottled hen, with a no less eager voice, is not mentioned in any verse that I know of.

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To my mind, there is a deeper significance in the literary tradition associating koel and spring, though it seems unlikely that the poets who observed the tradition were aware of this significance. The koel, as everyone knows, is not burdened with the consequences of spring, as almost every other bird and animal is. There is no nest to build, no eggs to hatch, no clamouring young to be fed and cared for. The koel foists its eggs upon foster parents, house-crows being the usual victims. The male koel induces the nesting crows to chase it, and while they are engaged in pursuit, the hen lays its eggs in the crows' nest, leaving their hatching and the care of the progeny to the foster parents. This being so, it seems to me that no other bird is better suited to typify spring, the season of love and desire. For a love unburdened with domestic cares at the end must be the freest and most spontaneous love, and in the koel's springtime we find this rare freedom.



Country Notebook

RAILROAD MONKEYS

by M. KRISHNAN

INSIDE the compartment it was crowded and close, and outside too the afternoon was muggy. I bought a "sweet-lime" at Jalarpet Junction to assuage thirst and lassitude, and balanced it speculatively on my bent knee. Would it be bitter, would it be weak and watery, or would it be sharply satisfying? A hairy grey arm slid over my shoulder, lifted the fruit off my knee, and disappeared, all in one slick, unerring movement.

I jumped out of the compartment, and there perched on the roof of the carriage, was the new owner of the sweet-lime, a trim, pink-and-grey she-monkey, eating it. My gestured threats had no effect on her, squatting securely out of reach, and she ate on unconcernedly. She jerked the rind free of the top of the fruit with her teeth and detached it in pieces, and having exposed the pulp, bit into it daintily, eating it in small mouthfuls, removing the white, pith-like core with her fingers and spitting out the pips.

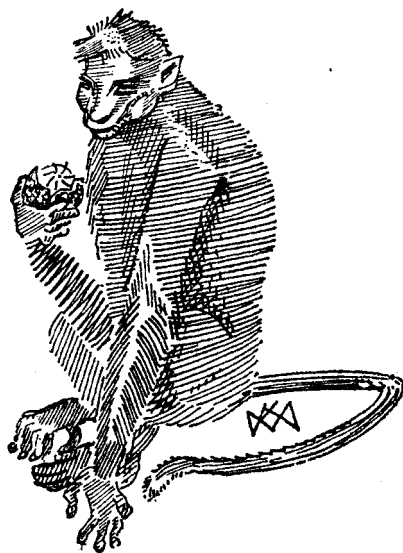
I should have felt annoyed, I suppose, but it was the first time I had seen a macaque eat a sweet-lime and I was interested. Years ago an American lady had lectured me on the right and only way to eat an orange; how one should take the bitter rind with the pulp as nature had intended a citrous fruit to be eaten. I had never been able to eat any citrous fruit that way, and I felt gratified to note that this macaque ate the fruit just as I do, rejecting rind, pith and pips with care.

A big, thick-muscled dog-monkey came stalking along the carriage tops, and my she-monkey leaped lightly on to the galvanised iron roof of the platform and from there to the security of the slender upper branches of a neem where the dog-monkey would find it hard to follow, the half-eaten fruit clutched securely in one hand. She did not stuff it into her mouth, to be stowed away in her cheek-pouch till danger had passed, as macaques are apt to do—apparently the acrid rind was as distasteful to this daughter of nature as it is to me!

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There are many suburban stations along South Indian railways that hold their colonies of Bonnet monkeys. I could name a dozen such places off-hand, and these have sustained their individual macaque colonies from ever since I can remember. This partiality of macaques to railroad stations is not peculiar to the south—in North India, the Rhesus takes the place of the Bonnet monkey along railways. Both are macaques, and look and behave very similarly, the flat, tousled crown of hair and longer tail distinguishing the Bonnet monkey from his northern cousin. The Langurs, no less sacred and therefore equally suffered by men, are rarely colonists at railway stations, though they will settle down in the neighbourhood of suburban shrines.

At these railroad colonies you can see every stage in the evolution of macaque society; the infants at their mothers' stomachs, the big dog-monkeys living as largely by plundering their fellows as by their own pickings, the carmine-faced lepers,



the shrinking elders well past their prime. I have noticed that such colonies contain many more individuals than do troops of feral macaques, and I believe these railroad settlements are usually built up of several troops which have discovered that slick hands can come by more things on a congested platform than in the jungles.

There is no recognised leader among them, as there is in a feral troop, and I have often felt amused at the behaviour of two equally powerful, dominant dog-monkeys when their paths happen to cross. Each ignores the other studiously then, and affects some urgent preoccupation, preferring to live and let live rather than fight for mastery. Democracy is an institution that requires one to be unmindful of his individuality at times.

Strangely enough, though naturalists have studied macaques in the jungles, where they are nomadic, there does not appear to be any detailed record of these railroad settlements, semi-parasitic on passing humanity. A study of such a colony would, I feel, amply repay the effort, and perhaps some day an observant stationmaster will give us an authentic account of the social behaviour and habits of these settled macaques.

BULBULS' NEST

M. Krishnan's COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

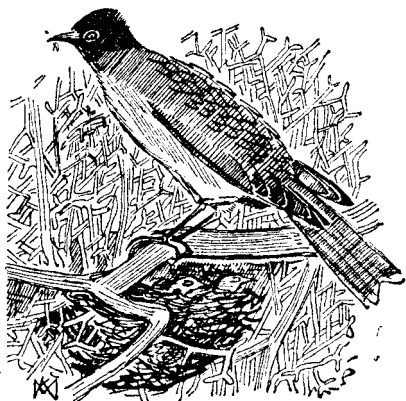
AN eight-foot high Kalli hedge limits the eastern boundary of my compound, and serves to keep the goats and cattle out. No beast can force its way through without getting spattered all over with the thick, white, corroding milk from the fragile phyllodes, that burns and irritates the skin, but birds with their insignificant weight and covering of feathers have no fear of the Euphorbia. My neighbour's hens sit under the Kalli hedge all day and scratch in its shade, dozens of sparrows roost in it each night, and some time ago a pair of Red-vented Bulbuls built their nest in it, in a green fork level with my head.

Bulbuls are not specially talented architects. Some of them nest in tree-tops at safe elevations, and some are careless even with regard to height. The Red-vented Bulbul is content with any site it can find, and usually nests in bushes and hedges, not far from the ground. The nest in my Kalli hedge is typical of the bird—a few thin twigs and stringy roots twined together in a shallow tea-cup lined with fibres and grass. The nest is placed within the hedge, with a branch of the Kalli overhanging it, but otherwise there is no attempt at concealment. An unremarkable nest, and now deserted and broken by the wind and rain, but it has a story to tell.



I first noticed this nest early in August, when there were four little speckled eggs in it, and by the last week of the month there were three naked, squirming squabs in it—the fourth egg disappeared, cleanly and without trace. From the easy chair on my verandah I could see the bulbuls coming in with food for their young. Every few minutes, the intervals depending on the quickness with which they could catch an insect, one or the other parent would come flying in, perch on the overhanging bough, dive under to the nest, and emerge a moment later with nothing in its beak. The weather seemed to be a decisive factor in food supply. High winds and heavy showers are frequent in August and during spells of rain I noticed that the bulbuls kept to the nest. Obviously it was futile to seek prey then, and one of the birds would stay with the young in the nest, sheltering them with fluffed plumage and slightly spread wings.

When I saw the nest it struck me that it was hardly the time of year for perpetuating the species. Mid-monsoon months, with tearing winds and downpours in the offing, is no time to rear young, especially in a nest placed in a Kalli hedge. But I

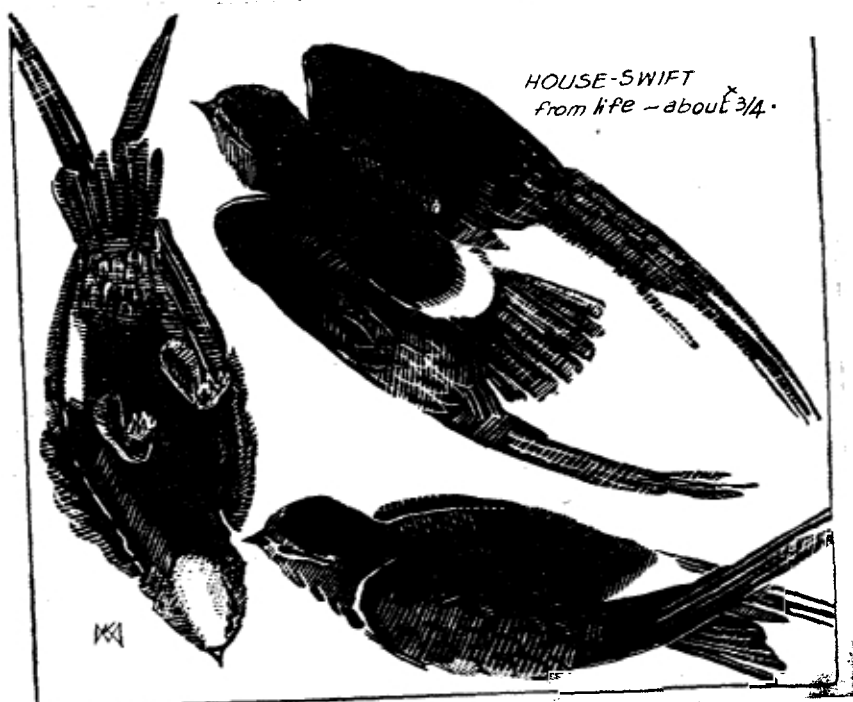


revised my opinion when, with each visit to the nest, I could see the young growing apace and gaining in size. They seemed to have a native hardiness that I had not allowed for, and the nest did give them a measure of insulation. Their bodies were now covered with dark, incipient plumage, though their eyes were still closed, and on sensing my approach they would open their disproportionately large mouths to the extent of their gape, squirm about and clamour for food. This violent reaction to any approach to the nest is instinctive, and I suppose it gets the young an adequate supply of food, since normally only the parents with food come to the nest. But I wonder if this does not serve, in some measure, a protective function as well. The sight of a nestful of agitated fledglings with enormous, gaping, raw, red mouths might well have a discouraging effect on a prospective predator,



Some days ago the weather took on a cold edge all of a sudden, and that night there was torrential rain, followed by a stiff wind. Next morning I noticed that the bulbuls were no longer visiting their nest with food, and when I went to it the three fledglings were lying stretched in it, cold, stiff and unresponsive. By evening some bodysnatcher had removed them.

Only the bedraggled nest remains now to bear witness to this unhappy story. The nesting pair have left the hedge and might well be one of the dozen pairs of bulbuls around my house that enliven each day with their rattling, buoyant, cheering calls. Later on, no doubt, they will rear another brood, in the milder and more even weather of November. It is not strength or wisdom or courage that survives, but persistent domesticity, and these bulbuls, that breed through the year, will live for ever, assuredly.



HOUSE-SWIFT
from life - about 3/4.

Marathon Flyers

ALL day long, over town and countryside, House-Swifts scour the heavens on tireless wings, hawking their aerial prey. No other common bird is so constantly in flight, for these swifts are out with the peep of day and nothing short of a thunderstorm drives them home before dark. Kites are a feature of Indian skies, and in places vultures circle and soar for hours on end, but all of them come down to earth or tree-top some time, and their airborne flight on still wings has a passive, mechanical quality—only the swifts whirl round in mounting spirals or cruise along on flickering wing-tips, without any rest till nightfall. All the four toes of their feet are turned forward, and cannot be reversed, so that they cannot sit in bushes or hop along the ground like other birds. But then House-Swifts do not hop about or descend to earth—they are in the air all day, and when light fails they fly straight to their roosting shelters, to crevices in old mortar or stone, or to their communal nests built of feathers and straw and fibres cemented together with their saliva.

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Once I had a closer look at these birds than one has usually. A pair of House-Swifts were roosting every evening in a deep fissure in the plaster of my verandah roof—they were not nesting then, but only using the crevice to sleep in. One night I climbed a ladder and hooked them out of their cosy retreat with my forefinger and took them into my bedroom. The way they hung on to my fingertips, their clasping, curved, pin-pointed toes pinching and digging into the skin, was a painful revelation of the clinging powers of their feet.

Often enough I had watched them come in to roost, flying right on to the mouth of the shelter and clinging for a moment to its lip before creeping in, and no doubt tight-grasping toes are essential to them, but I had not thought that such tiny birds (no larger than sparrows, and slimmer) could hold on so powerfully. I put them down on the white counterpane of my bed, where they were as helpless as beetles on their backs, and sketched them by

the glare of a 60 c.p. lamp. For a while they struggled to gain wing, but their sharp nails got entangled in the weave of the fabric and they could not even creep along. When turned on their backs they lay quite still, and seemed to go to sleep, for they closed their eyes.

In the hand these swifts felt very unlike what one might suppose they would feel like. They were, of course, astonishingly light, as all small birds in the hand are, but they seemed to be made up of iron-hard muscle and fluff down, with hardly any soft flesh except at the wide gullet. The pile of down was thick around the throat, and above and below the root of the tail, in the tail-coverts, but elsewhere the feathers lay close, especially over the wings. I noticed that in spite of the fact that these swifts cannot preen themselves frequently as other birds do, being so much in the air, their plumage seemed well-oiled and sleek. I noticed, also, that they were free from external parasites, to which swifts are singularly prone because their aerial habit precludes dust baths and attention to toilet. All the same I gave them a dusting of a patent insecticide (which I use for my pigeons) before I put them back in their crevice.

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Late in the evening, just before roosting, House-Swifts will band together, and go whirling up into the sky in a close, shrill, hilarious kit. This "balling" of swifts is a thing that everyone who has watched them, from Gilbert White onwards, has commented upon, but no one has explained it. Can it not be just a liking for company before parting for the night that moves these swifts? They are highly sociable birds, and one sees them in pairs and kits always; they often roost together, and they have communal nests. I think it reasonable to suppose that it is a social instinct that draws them together at the end of the day, and since they cannot sit in company, they go whirling up in a compact, twittering group. Even otherwise why should not society have an exhilarating effect and induce strange antics among the lower orders of creation as well?

King of the hedgerows

M. KRISHNAN'S
Country
Notebook

YESTERDAY, coming home in the evening, I saw a mongoose in a field by the road and he saw me, for he raised his head, stared briefly at me, and disappeared into the thick thorn hedge that fenced the plot. I hid behind a roadside tamarind and peered through its forked bole, taking good care to keep as wooden as the tree itself. Nothing rewarded my prompt immobility at first, but after a minute or two a sharp, grey head looked out of the thorn fence, some ten yards from where the mongoose had gone in, and then he slid out of cover.

He was a big, full-grown mongoose, grey and thick and strong-looking,

grown out of the pretty slimness of youth. For a while he kept running alongside the fence and doubling in his tracks, as if he were looking for some little thing he had dropped in the grass. Then he came ambling into the middle of the field, where I could see him plainly, stopping every now and again to sit up on his haunches, or scratch in the earth, and once to make a quick, sideways snap and crunch at some small prey, probably a grasshopper. Obviously he was not hunting anything in particular, but just mooching around. Mongooses have a purposive air when they go hunting, in pairs at times, and they keep a sharp lookout then and quarter the ground systematically.

THE SUNDAY STATESMAN, OCTOBER 22, 1950 15

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He came nearer and nearer my tree, and finally dived into an ant-hill with many mouths, through an opening that seemed hardly wide enough to take his head—much of a mongoose's thickness is only harsh hair, and few creatures are so adept at squeezing through crevices. He was out again almost immediately, through the same opening. Apparently he had found space to turn in beneath the mound, and for a while he stayed with his head and forefeet out of the ant-hill and the rest of him within. Coming upon him just then, one might have supposed that he was emerging from his earth, and that the ant-hill was his earth—which goes to show how cautious one has to be in surmising from one's observation of animals, and how little we know about the domestic arrangements of the mongoose. For all that I know, that ant-hill might have been that mongoose's earth: I have known other mongooses use ant-hills as retiring rooms, but that, of course, proves nothing. Give a mongoose a dark burrow or hole anywhere, and sure enough he will investigate it.

I had felt things that I hoped were not ants, creeping down my neck, and now a nip in the small of my back confirmed my worst fears. One cannot be part of the trunk of a tamarind for long without the ants knowing about it. I whistled shrilly, twice, and the mongoose froze at once and looked about him cautiously, but when I

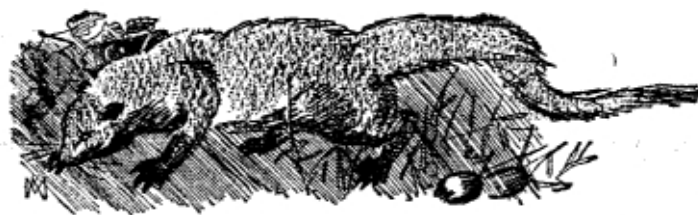
showed myself he was off, in a long, undulating, grey streak, that fled to the fence and vanished into it.

Outside the pages of story-books mongooses do not live on a diet of poisonous snakes. Beetles, grubs, grasshoppers, eggs (they can climb when they like), lizards, snakes, birds, small mammals—nothing they can catch and conquer comes amiss to them. They have been known to eat from a tiger's kill, and once I saw a mongoose among the creatures gathered at an ant-hill when the termites swarmed. It was comic, the way he jumped into the rustling air and snapped at the winged prey, and the way the other termite-eaters kept a safe distance from him even in the excitement of the orgy. I suspect that mongooses in the scrub eat a variety of fruit and seeds—especially the dark, twinkling berries of the Lantana.

I have nothing to say on the mongoose-versus-cobra topic, and confess that I have never seen the contest except when it was staged by snake charmers. But recently I came across something in a book, concerning this, that surprised me. No doubt you have seen the mongoose-cobra motif as executed by taxidermists, the snake with three coils wound securely round its adversary's body, and its hood spread right above the mongoose's open, toothful mouth and scarlet-beady eyes. And no doubt you have wondered, as I have done, if a slight relaxation from the rigid, formal symmetry of the composition would not make it seem less impossible and unreal.

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Well, in this book, full of thrilling reproductions from real wild life photographs, there is also a picture of this stuffed, unreal piece, set in an aloe-fringed ground, and illustrating a battle to the death between the celebrated Indian slayer of the cobra, and the no less known Indian cobra. I do not recall if the caption says that both combatants died eventually, (which would be strictly true!) but this picture proves that it is not enough to be careful in one's observation of the mongoose, or any other wild creature. One has to be honest as well.



Country Notebook

Grey Partridge

THE millet stands nine feet in the fields, and the heads are ripening in the sun. The scrub has a fresh, newly-washed look after last week's downpours, the skies are clear, and the air crisp. Each morning the brave, resounding calls of partridges answer one another in the fields around, and at sunset they call again. November is here.

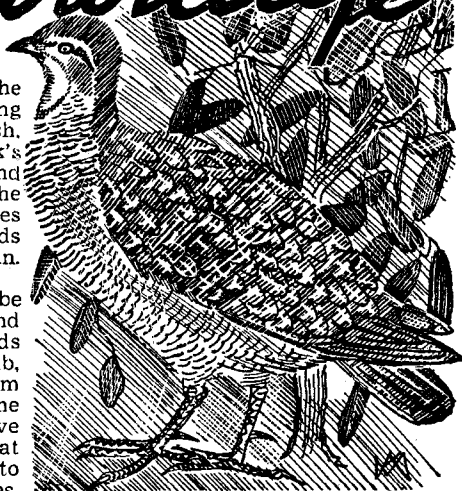
Another month, and the crop will be razed to the ground and the corn and culms harvested. The dried up fields will merge into the outlying scrub, and one will see partridges in them every day, picking the grain in the stubble. Watching them then I have seen a minor miracle happen at times, a partridge vanishing into thin air right in front of my eyes. The brown earth and the sun-bleached stubble provide these birds with an ideal stage for the disappearing trick, for their colouring blends perfectly with this background, and they have only to put a few cut culms between themselves and the watcher to lose all outline and definition.

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There was a time when I used to wonder why a bird with amber and buff plumage, pale mottlings on the back and pencilled black bars across the breast, brown pinions and red legs, should be called the Grey Partridge. I know the reason now. The "grey," of course, does not specify colour, but denotes the indistinct, broken-toned appearance of the bird—a certain lack of sharp, entire shape. The typical scrub of the countryside is also grey, especially in summer, for it has a streaky, non-descript character. No large mass of colour dominates it, and it is broken up with ridges and depressions, stones and burrows, wiry much-branched shrubs and thorn and desiccated grasses, and an occasional patch of sand or rock or some succulent xerophyte. And the authentic spirit of this scrub is the Grey Partridge, skulking along in the undergrowth, running over broken ground in a brown blur, greeting the light and bidding it farewell with loud, challenging calls. To my mind the bird typifies the roving, chancy life of the scrub as no other creature does, and is part and parcel of it.

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As everyone knows, partridges take reluctantly to wing when danger threatens, preferring their sturdy legs and the refuge of the bush-covered earth. Even when flushed, their whirring, low flight takes them only to the next bit of cover. But in places where the cover is continuous, it is almost impossible to flush them. There is a long, depressed seam of sand in the scrub here, a miniature river-bed along which no water flows except during torrential rains. On either side of it the bushes grow thick, spiky Carissas, the stringy-leaved *Dodonea viscosa*, grasses, and Lantana in its ranker reaches, featuring the growth. This cover holds partridges. I have



vivid recollections of two beats along this sand-stream. The birds kept dodging from one bank of scrub to the other, and neither a terrific din nor flung stones could get them to rise. They seemed to know, only too well, how safe they were in the cover and that flight would expose them.

Not long ago I came across an even better instance of this terrestrial bias of partridges. I was walking across a flat stretch of ploughed land, keeping to the firm, grass-bound boundaries between the fields, when I saw a pair of partridges about fifty yards from me. I walked towards them casually and not too directly, and they walked away from me. It was clear that my ruse would not work, for they had seen me and were, obviously, watching my movements. There was no cover anywhere around except for an occasional thorn-bush.

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Wishing to see how soon they would take to wing if I advanced on them, I walked openly and briskly towards them. They broke into a trot and ran ahead of me, keeping the distance between us undiminished. I increased my pace and so did they, trotting ahead in a close brace. For a furlong this absurd position was maintained and at the end of it I stopped dead, restraining an unmanly impulse to pick up a clod and throw it at the cussed birds. They pulled up, separated a few yards, and began to scratch in the earth. After a while I recommenced the chase, and again they trotted demurely ahead, keeping their distance. Finally, I gave up when I noticed that a cultivator was watching me from a distance, and the unreasonable conviction grew in me that he was smiling at me because I reminded him of a housewife herding chicken down a lane—it was a fact that he did smile. Of course if I had broken into a run and waved my arms about, shouting, I could have got those partridges to rise, but that did not seem a fair way of experiment. And perhaps, at the back of my mind, I had the uneasy feeling that such a course would only have moved them to a canter!

M. Krishnan

Rural Cousins

I HAVE just returned to the country from a seacoast city from a heavy, still, moisture-laden atmosphere. Here, too, the horizons are blocked, not by square architecture but by a ring of hills, and here, too, it is close and humid with unfallen rain. But I sense no longer that pent-up feeling in the air that oppressed me in the city. I think it is the sight of open, green fields and hill-slopes that gives me this relief, the eye compensating in some measure for the closeness sensed by the skin. Anyway, this feeling of spaciousness and freedom from circumscription is something very real, and something peculiar to the countryside. It affects not only me, but the creatures that belong here as well, and tones their behaviour. Even the crows are influenced by it.

I know that these birds, both the all black Jungle Crow and the slimmer House Crow, are the same zoologically as the slick, audacious thieves of town and city, but their ways are different here. They are far less dependent on humanity than in urban areas—strangely enough, the few crows that come into the village to pick refuse are usually Jungle Crows, and not grey-necks. They are a hardflying, industrious lot, these countryside crows, and one meets them oftener in cultivation and in the jungles than in human settlements. They forage for their living, instead of scavenging for it, and go about in flocks as a rule, the grey-necks being noticeably more gregarious. They are not shy of men, but neither are they insolently unmindful—they keep their distance. And they find their food.

They are busy all day, hunting for food. Jungle berries, fruit, seeds, insects and other small fry, eggs, nestlings, carrion—few things come amiss to them. I have seen a crow fishing in a puddle, and it was not wholly unsuccessful! They will pull up sprouting millet, seed by seed, but soon tire of this laborious mode of feeding. Nests and young life provide them with substitutes for the household refuse of towns, but of course these involve active hunting. Carrion is an important source of food for these crows, Jungle Crows, especially, devour dead flesh with an almost vulturish rapacity and speed. Motoring to Ootacamund last June, we saw a mass of Jungle Crows in the middle of the road, completely covering the carcass of a newly-dead dog, the victim of some preceding motorist. The birds rose thickly from their feasting just in time to let us pass, and by the time we had gone on twenty yards they had hidden the carcass again with their packed bodies. It was not a pretty sight.

However, these birds can make a pleasing picture also. I know a deep gorge over which the home-going crows of the place fly each evening, on their way to roosting trees miles beyond the circuit of these hills. They fly low crossing the gorge, keeping just above its sides, and then dip down to maintain the same height from the flat land beyond. Hundreds of crows fly past this narrow pass in an almost continuous stream every evening, and the swish of their wings, amplified by the gorge walls, is like the sighing of heavy winds against tree-tops and telegraph wires. Framed sharply within the sides

of the pass and silhouetted against the fading light, the steady, onward flow of grey-necks makes as beautiful a picture as one can hope to see outside a Japanese print.

Rural crows fly long and far, getting to their feeding grounds at dawn and flying home by nightfall, to roosting trees, maybe 20 or 30 miles away. Flying home they keep low and very much together. There is safety in their close formation, and efficiency and economy of movement in the way they paddle past on broad wings. They keep

a sharp lookout on these flights, and on the least suspicion of danger from the earth they rise steeply in the air, well out of range. They follow their leaders, and there is wisdom and strength in their clannish flock, for their elders are canny old birds, and have the experience of decades to guide them.

I believe that crows can see much better in the dark than most other birds. They are on the wing before sunrise, while the light is still uncertain, and fly home through obscure dusk.

On moonlight nights crows are up and about till a very late hour. Being somewhat of a night-bird myself, I have often watched them flitting from tree-top to tree-top in the moonlight, but the light has never been good enough for me to know just what they were doing. Perhaps they were looking for nests—and supper.

M. Krishnan



Frog's Farewell

M. Krishnan's Country Notebook

DECEMBER brings in the harvest, and evening skies no longer dramatic with massed clouds, but limpidly beautiful—and the frogs again. Of course the frogs were there long before the month, but they were less vocal then. I hear the chirping of slim-waisted, olive brown tree-frogs now, and meet them unexpectedly in the house at times, perched on the top shelf of the book-case or creeping easily along the walls. And at night the land frogs rejoice in song, from every ditch and drain. The chorus begins abruptly, shortly after nine o'clock, and goes on for hours. Every frog has its peculiar tonal pitch and keeps a time of its own—trying to follow each insistent voice in the pandemonium of quick trebles, persistent baritone, deep quavers, and guttural croaks, you feel confused and almost dizzy.

Each tireless reveller seems to keep repeating a particular phrase. You can almost make out the words after a while. Naturally, the words and the phrases will vary with the mood and mental associations of the listener, but Aristophanes has a rendering that summarizes all frog-song:

"Brekeke-kesh, koash, koash," it is the voice of love.

And it is the voice of a spent love, for the roadside puddles and ditches are squelching with the last of the tadpoles. So far as I know, the breeding season is over, for the local frogs at any rate. Soon after the monsoon, when frog-song dominated the nights, they bred, and then they were silent. Their nocturnal chorus is heard again, but I think no ardent spirit prompts them now. It is the male frogs that are heard after dark, and it is true that their song is, primarily, an expression of love, but what I hear has no sexual significance. It is the farewell of the frogs to the rains, and the firm earth.

Soon the ditches will be dry, and the uneven scrub around will hold puddles no longer. The frogs must leave the solid land over which they have spread during the past five months, and retire to marshes and ponds. They cannot live for long without water, for their thin, porous skins are poor insulation against surface evaporation, and with no water to soak in, they would soon get desiccated and die. Till the monsoon comes once more, and the drains are turned to miniature flood streams, these Dutch nightingales will not assail the darkness with their voices around human dwellings. Perhaps, unconsciously, they are aware of this, and that is what moves them to song. Farewells, in nature, are often emphatic. The last rains of the year are downpours, and the frogs retreating to distant water are loud and long in their good-byes to terra firma.

That may seem a premature and hasty surmise, considering that long after the rains, mottled brown frogs hop about the steps and verandahs, even invading the house when the lights are turned on. But these friendly "frogs" are not frogs at all—they are toads; house-toads, if you prefer to call them that. Toads

have a tough skin that keeps their bodily juices well within, and so they have no fear of dry places. In fact, the majority of toads prefer dry places, except when breeding. The line of demarcation between frogs and toads is not rigid, and at times it is extremely tenuous. I confess that in spite of a misspent youth, when I cut up large numbers of frogs and studied their interiors, I am not always sure of the difference. Broadly speaking, the

difference is this. Frogs have smooth, and often vividly coloured, skins, and sensuous, bulging thighs: they revel in the water and leap over the land. The male frogs are much given to serenading.

The toads, on the other hand, are not fond of the energetic life, and have brown

and sober skins, often warty. Their bearing is quiet and portly, and they go about their loves with reticence. The difference between them and the frogs is the difference between a gentleman and a bouncer. However, there are exceptions on both sides, and it is not always easy to say whether a given specimen is a frog or a toad by observing its conduct. But there is a better way. When in doubt, call the specimen a frog, and you are safe. For I have it, on excellent authority, that "the term frog is acceptable when speaking of the frog and toad group in general!"



COUNTRY NOTEBOOK POSTBAG

CAT V MONGOOSE

WHEN I was very young I eagerly sought the opinion of a patient but perplexed father on various points of natural history that then seemed important to me. At times there were evasive replies, and one vexed question, whether a hippopotamus or a rhinoceros would win in a fair fight, remains unanswered to this day. G.L., Calcutta, raises a somewhat similar issue when he asks if a large, tough cat can kill a mongoose with ease.

I am tempted to follow in my parent's diplomatic footsteps, and reply that much would depend on the age, early training and feeding, and current fitness of each animal; but on second thoughts I see no need for caution. A large, tough cat (var-domestic) cannot kill a full-grown mongoose easily. The Common Grey Mongoose is not a large animal: nearly half of its yard-long adult length is tail, and much of its bulk is harsh hair. A big mongoose weighs about six lbs. But neither is the common or garden cat a large animal. A big specimen weighs about 8-10 lbs, no more. The cat would get severely bitten before it could overpower its lighter but equally agile and hard biting opponent. Perhaps even fatally bitten.

* * * *

G.L.'s doubts over the prowess of mongooses is due to the ease with which his dog killed a sub-adult mongoose with one bite through the back. He is surprised that an animal, reputed to be so formidable with snakes, should have succumbed so tamely. I do not think the incident proves that mongooses die easy, or enjoy a false reputation. It only shows that G.L.'s dog (no description given but I should be surprised if it weighs under 30 lbs, or is of the Cocker sort) has a quick, powerful bite. I have had more than my fair share of dog bites, but think that we are apt to underrate canine jaw power because dogs, snapping at men, bite half-heartedly as a rule. Moreover, I think every allowance should be made for the fact that that mongoose was sub-adult. As with all hairy creatures, a half-grown mongoose looks three-quarters-grown because its hair is as long as that of an adult.

Other instances of a dog killing a mongoose are on record. The wild life photographer, Cherry Kearton, lost a pet mongoose to a dog, and went in for a pet that could hold its own against most dogs, a Serval cat. Years ago a dog killed a mongoose (also a pet, and juvenile) in the barracks at Fort St. George, Madras, with more dramatic consequences. The owner of the mongoose shot the dog's owner dead.

P.C., Calcutta, reports a curious bit of bird behaviour. His attention was drawn, by his dog barking at

it, to a hawk that had come into the front hall of his ground floor flat. The bird toppled over and seemed on the point of death "the head hung loosely and the body was limp." He took it outside and placed it on the lawn, when it got to its feet, and with a warning, hissing sound flew 200 feet into a large tree, and was seen no more. P.C. asks, "Is there any explanation for its strange behaviour?"

Two explanations occur to me, but what occurs to me, more readily, is that it is a pity P.C. did not come upon his hawk sooner, and note its condition on entry. That would have given us a valuable clue. I think it quite likely that alarmed by a large dog barking at it, and unfamiliar surroundings, the hawk flew about frantically and knocked itself silly against a wall or some piece of furniture. That would account for its subsequent behaviour. Birds unfamiliar with indoor conditions get flurried when they find themselves in a room, and seem blind to obvious exits at times. I have seen a House-Swift (in spite of the name!) ignore an open window and fly into walls, coming down to the floor repeatedly, when released in a room in daylight. Why did that hawk come in at all? I do not know, but the most unlikely birds do come into the house occasionally.

An explanation that may seem less likely, at first, is that the hawk felt faint, and following the impulse of a bird losing its controls, came down to earth and crept to the nearest cover. Other animals, in an enfeebled state, have been known to enter houses. Fainting is due to organic causes, of course, but I believe that sudden fright can induce a swoon in some beasts and birds as readily as in men.

* * * *

Miss L.V.M., Ranchi, wants to know if a Kalli hedge will keep out cattle, and how it should be raised.

The Kalli (*Euphorbia tirucalli*, the Milk Hedge), is a xerophyte common in the South, and no animal will eat it because its much branched phyllodes are full of a caustic latex. It is raised from cuttings, and makes a cattle-proof hedge when planted a foot apart.

[Inquiries from readers on natural history subjects are welcome.]

M. K. KRISHNAN



JACKALS AT PLAY

IT is generally thought, in scientific circles, that playfulness is characteristic of the juvenile stage of animal life, when it serves not only as an outlet for overflowing spirits, but also to equip the young with the skills essential to adulthood. Of course it is known that some adult creatures also indulge in play, but scientific writers are apt to pass over such things quickly, as if it is not good



form to comment on the lapses of grown-up life. Please note that I specify writers with a theoretical bias—naturalists with a less academic background have set down what they have seen, and sometimes what they have heard of, with no restraint.

Even so, looking back upon more than twenty years of avid reading of every book and magazine article on animals I could lay hands on, I can recall only a few passages about the play of grown-up animals. On the contrary, the literature on juvenile play is considerable, and that wise and charming classic "The Childhood of Animals," by Chalmers Mitchell, features this aspect of animal behaviour.

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Squatting on a culvert one night, in the dense shade of an aged tamarind, I wished these men of science had been there with me. And I wished that a certain pedagogue, who had explained to me the play method of teaching children now so much in vogue, had also been there.

Below the culvert was a drain

M. Krishnan's

Country Notebook

and beyond it bush-fringed acres of harvested groundnut, bare to the brilliant moon. Two jackals were playing in the field, crouching, running, leaping, twisting and turning without pause, with no aim or object beyond the obvious enjoyment of the pastime. It was cold, and I had no coat. It was late, and the cosy comforts of my house were near-by. I had watched jackals in a frolicsome mood many times before, by daylight and at night, but never had I seen any play so intense and self-central, so almost infectious in its élan, as the play of these moon-struck beasts; and I sat on, still and huddled.

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They chased each other in giddy circles, then shot off to different corners of the field and disappeared into the bushes, to come prancing back to the middle of the plot and recommence the game. With open mouths and lolling tongues they whirled and frisked about, and I could hear the sharp intakes of breath, but not their footfall. It was like watching some fantastic shadow-play, the shadows distinct and deep, with silver highlights, when they came near, and suddenly blurred when they went out of focus to the far end of the field: their movements objectless as the flurry of leaves in a breeze, but voluntary and conforming to some zestful pattern of joy, unfamiliar to me.

Presently the jackals separated and lay down apart, panting. After a while one of them got up and trotted over to the other, and when quite close darted several lengths backwards abruptly. This move, an invitation to resume the game apparently, was repeated three or four times, and when it failed to elicit any response the jackal gave it up, and began to play by itself. It was with difficulty that I contained my laughter as the mad thing spun round and round, twisting about in the air so much that it seemed likely it would tumble clean over, utterly absorbed in its solo performance. All at once the other jackal sat up, lifted a lean snout, and let out a series of staccato yelps. The lone reveller froze in its tracks and turned towards the sound. It walked across to its companion in a tentative way, with a halt after every few stiff-legged steps, and then they wheeled around together and trotted away in a close couple, as if they had just remembered an important engagement.

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There was nothing educative about the play of those jackals, no instinctive, play-way equipment for the stern needs of life. Nor was it a courtship display that I had witnessed. It was play: aimless, adult enjoyment of good health and spirits. I do not suggest that the games of young creatures do not serve to shape their adult efficiency, but even grown-up animals play, just for the fun of it. All

their waking hours are not occupied with the business of getting enough to eat and avoiding being eaten. They have "time to stand and stare" (they do not spend hours in regret and apprehension), time to feel bored, time for a little fun and frolic when the mood takes them. Naturally, this mood rarely touches captive animals, whose behaviour we have studied and know best. The jackal is not alone in its penchant for play, but we see other wild animals far less commonly and so know little about their games and pastimes.

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But, perhaps, the jackal is more given to playfulness when grown than many other creatures. Apparently, it gets a kick out of being chased and chasing. Pairs will go scampering across the hillsides in an amazing display of light-footed agility, taking on the rôle of fugitive by turns; and anyone who has done a lot of motoring over country roads must have come across a jackal that chose to run on ahead, instead of getting out of the way. It is not the blinding glare of the headlights, behind it, that make it act in that way, and I do not think it is fear—it is a playful whim, and a touch of devil.

Where they are sure of their ground, jackals will, occasionally, have a game of catch-me-if-you-can with the local dogs in the dusk: I have seen one repeatedly baiting a reluctant dog to chase it, coming up to within five yards of its heavy-limbed cousin each time. I have even heard stories of canny old jacks that love to lead the hounds on a wild-goose chase—but these are based, possibly, on an uneasy conscience!

THE SCRUB'S NEW YEAR

ONE afternoon in the last few days of 1949 I was explaining to a Belgian, unfamiliar with the country, how all over India the New Year did not synchronise with the Western calendar, but was more naturally associated with spring. I was careful to add that 'Sankaranthi' and other mid-January celebrations, so important to an agricultural nation, marked, not the new year, but the conclusion of the harvest. The trees on the hillside where we stood were in thick leaf, and the millet fields below newly reaped. I pointed to them to make my meaning clear, and remarked that the jungle now in a vegetative phase, would bloom in April to welcome our new year. The Belgian nodded his comprehension, and with an equally economical gesture indicated the scrubland spread out at our feet. "Spring there?", he asked me.



He was right. Spring was about to arrive there. The herbs and shrubs of open land, with their shallower reserves of water and root systems, do not wait till summer to celebrate their spring. The scrub is in bloom now and at its best, in January. The grass is past the vivid green of eager, rain-fed growth and its tall scapes are coming up. Rhizomes and tubers and bulbs which grew succulent leaves above ground during the rains, are sending up flowering shoots. Even the shrubs, washed clean by the monsoons and green with new leaves, are no longer thin and sharp, and many of them are in flower already. And in rocky, dry places the xerophytes,

Another Page From M. Krishnan's Country Notebook

turgid with sap, wear an opulent look.

If you want to know the plants of the scrubland, this is the time, for the way to know any plant is to get acquainted with its flowers. However, you must look for their bloom: unlike the forest, the scrub does not bloom with theatrical emphasis, with a blaze of massed colour and a spread of scents. Its flowers are small and inconspicuous, as a rule, but you will find beauty enough here if you seek it now. I will not attempt any description of its flora except to mention the commonest plants, for nothing can be more tiresome than a crowded list of Latin names, or give a drearier impression of a land of rich character. Moreover, no one who knows the variety and profusion of the Indian scrub will attempt its ecology in a brief note.

It is among the herbaceous plants and twiners that you will find the loveliest scrub flowers. Where it is cool and not too dry, the Tradescantia spreads its carpet of tender green blades and bluish-violet flowers. In the drier reaches you will find other carpets, no less lovely—a purplish green, minute-leaved plant growing in a velvety patch, studded with tiny red flowers, and the carpet of procumbent grasses and Justicias. Ruellias also grow in patches, and carry pretty flowers, but they are too woody to form carpets. Ipomeas creep along the ground, or display their showy, bell-shaped flowers on pliant stems draped about the woody shrubs, and the Thunbergia and Clitoris also festoon the shrubs with their beautiful blue flowers. The Abrus is another climber that is decorative, with its split-pod display of black-eyed coral seeds; and in places where the scrub merges into hillside jungles you may get the pleasantest of surprises meeting the gorgeous red, superlatively-named scandent lily, Gloriosa superba.



Naturally, water supply, soil and climate all influence the flora of the scrub profoundly. Alongside river beds the larger, tree-like shrubs are common. Oleander, the rank, sweet-scented Hiptage madablota, fragrant screw-pines and Bauhinias grow along the banks, and other large shrubs with showy flowers. This riparian scrub jungle varies much with locality and holds many true trees. The drier area, scrub proper, has its perfumes and colours, too. The henna (Lawsonia) and the wild jasmine are found here infrequently, and are worth the finding. The wild indigo (Tephrosia) and yellow-flowered, minor Cassias grow here, and the modest Cephalaria with white flowers and crimson fruits setting off its shapely, dark green leaves, climbs among the thorn. It is this tough, spiky scrub that I love—this is where I feel at home, with the thorn-clad Carissa and Capparis, coarse grasses, and wiry, woody, short shrubs like the Dodonea. The Dodonea has uninteresting, greenish flowers—but see it by moonlight, the bush gleaming and glistening with its leaves, and you will get to like it.

It is not by oversight that I have left the lantana out of the picture so far. This handsome shrub deserves special mention. Never, in the long and turbulent history of this ancient country has invader or conqueror, flood or famine, overpowered the land with the ubiquitous speed of the lantana's conquest. Originally brought from South America to Ceylon as a curiosity, the lantana annexed India overnight, and is now firmly established here as one of the commonest and most typical plants of the scrub, wasteland, and forest undergrowth. The secret of its success lies in the clubbed heads of abundant, dark,

twinkling berries that it bears through the year. These have an irresistible appeal to birds and beasts, and so the lantana is broadcast over the land. I have wanted, for years, to find some excuse for the lantana (not that it needs my championship) and at last I have discovered something in its favour that should appeal to men. Lantana leaf has been used as green manure for paddy in Mysore with success, and I hope other States will be equally successful in this use. I cannot imagine the scrubland without lantana.

BIRDS FROM A FAIRY-TALE

A DOZEN coconut trees stand around the house I live in now, and to them come creatures that like straight twigless boles. Bloodsuckers climb them in clumsy-legged corkscrews, squirrels race up and down the columnar trunks, and there is a squat, mottled gecko that is very much at home here.

Naturally, few birds ever come to the palms, except to perch on the great leaves, but recently a pair of Golden-backed Woodpeckers have taken to visiting their trunks. They do not stay for long on any tree, but fly from one coconut to another, settling squarely on the vertical boles as casually as other birds hop on to boughs. I find these woodpeckers fascinating. They look so ornate and outlandish, like birds out of a fairy-tale; and as they run easily up the sheer surface, or slip down it, with no change in their rigidly held pose but for quick, sideways transpositions, they do not look like birds at all. Their movements have that quality of change of place, without obvious, free use of limbs, that suggests clockwork. But whoever heard of clockwork birds that also call to each other in long, harsh, chattering laughs, and have the plumage and mannerisms of the creatures of the fantastic brothers Grimm!

Actually, these woodpeckers represent no exotic, romantic survivals,



but only extreme adaptation to a way of life. Their chisel-tipped beaks sound bark and crevice for grubs and wood-boring insects most efficiently, and their stiff tail feathers serve as props in their precarious stance. At first it may seem strange that things as flimsy as feathers should bear body weight, but the weight of these woodpeckers (like the weight of most birds) is surprisingly little, and the tail feathers only help, in an adventitious manner, as a third leg. Woodpeckers are so used to vertical surfaces that movement along them is normal and easy for them—they have even been observed asleep, stuck on to a tree trunk.

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THE woodpecker clan is much given to contrasty colour, but no other member of this specialist family has the barbarous splendour of plumage of the Golden-back. The gold of its back is deep and glints in the sun, its crest is a pure crimson, and its bib of white-dotted black and dark wings set off these rich tones emphatically. And its broad-winged, dip-and-rise flight, direct from tree to tree, is not what one would expect from a bird of its size, almost a foot long.

Twenty-five years ago, when I was a schoolboy in these parts, there were many spacious, rambling gardens here and tall trees, and Golden-backed Woodpeckers were common in them. Those gardens are built up now and the woodpeckers are gone. Highly specialized birds need much scope for their limited ways of life, and the Golden-back is, perhaps, the most specialized among the woodpeckers. The pair that visits my compound now represents the last of these birds here, so far as I know. There is nothing surprising in this. With the disappearance of broad belts of trees from an area, birds that need extensive sylvan feeding-grounds can no longer find a living in the place. No doubt the woodpeckers said to themselves "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new," and flew away on broad, undulating wings.

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BUT did they find them? There are plenty of wooded tracts within a few miles of this place, but with resident birds like woodpeckers that get used to a particular locality one cannot say that a change of environment can do no harm. They do not take kindly to such changes, and ousted from familiar grounds, especially suited to their extremely specialized way of life, they may not even survive the change. A woodpecker of another country, the Ivory-billed Woodpecker now practically extinct in America, is an example of this rigid adherence to habit and habitat. Surely there is woodland enough not too far from its original homes, but this bird was unable to adapt itself to new territories when driven out of its own, and so perished. I do not suggest that the Golden-backed Woodpecker is threatened with extinction, or is a rare bird today, but I apprehend that it is one of the birds that will suffer by our progressive civilization, and I think that I have been a witness to the passing of these quaint and splendid birds from one of their strongholds.

M. KRISHNAN

THE SUNDAY STATESMAN, FEBRUARY 4, 1951

FRIENDLY HOBGOBLINS

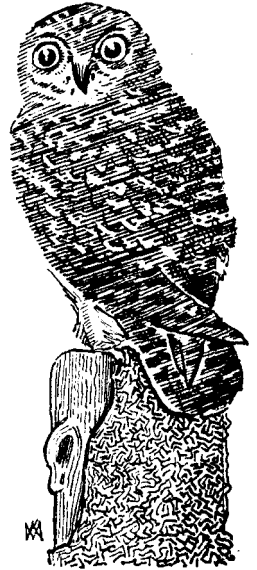
OTHER birds fly away. Or else they go about their business, unmindful of you, or sit passively on, not knowing you are there. But the Spotted Owlet resents your prying into its affairs, and takes pains to let you know that it does. It glares malevolently at you from round unwinking eyes, and bobs its round head up and down, the baleful yellow eyes still upon you, and a torrent of gurgling, voluble swearing pours out at you from its squat, softly-barred form.

All the owls are apt to resent close scrutiny but none so expressively as this owlet, though it is never dangerous as some of the larger members of the tribe can be. The Spotted Owlet's intimidatory display has been called clowning, because it is so small we can afford to feel amused at its impotent anger and bowing, bobbing clock-face. Imagine the bird magnified to the size of its larger cousins, and the demonstration would seem funny no longer; it would serve to scare people then all right.

Everyone knows this little owlet, by far the commonest of our owls and equally at home in town and country. In Madras, mosques and old public buildings, with towers and spires, offer ample hospitality to these birds, and I suppose other cities are not lacking in homes for them. Where there are aged trees, with knots and holes in their trunks, the owlet prefers a nice, dark hole in the wood, sufficiently deep for daytime retreat and siestas. Not that it has the traditional owl's intolerance of light. Spotted Owlets come out at noon sometimes to hunt prey, and it has been rightly said that they are crepuscular because they fear, not the sun, but the mobbing to which other diurnal birds subject them when they show up in daylight.

I have seen these owlets in broad daylight on several occasions, atop exposed perches, and though there were other birds about they took no notice of the owlets. That proves nothing, of course: no doubt other birds do mob them at times. But once I had a striking demonstration of how little the Spotted Owlet minds the glare. I was waiting in a railway retiring room for a belated train on a blazing February day, and just outside the window was an owlet, sitting on a telegraph post right out in the sun. For three-quarters of an hour, from 11-15 a.m. till 12-30 p.m., it sat stolidly on, turning its clock-dial face right over its back to glare at me from time to time, but otherwise static. When I went out to the foot of the post it flew away, but I remember I had to shade my eyes with my hand in spite of my tinted glasses, so intense was the glare.

Owlets clutch at their prey with their comprehensive talons, and catch them that way. Insects form their staple food, hawked in the air or pounced down upon from a lookout post, but they take minor lizards also, and even little birds and mice. I do not know why such a useful bird should be so widely abhorred, but the curse of the owl tribe is upon it, and even today there are quite a number of people encompassing its destruction when it is incautious enough to take up residence near their homes. A decrepit gateway in a mansion I



used to know was a favourite place with these birds, though they were sternly discouraged with a gun. I think quite half-a-dozen owlets were shot by the sentry on guard there during the four months I knew the place, without appreciably affecting its attraction to the local owlets. The man was always careful to make sure that a bird he had shot was finally dead before he would pick it up, and assured me that the clasp of its feet was a thing not lightly forgotten.

I am afraid we do not know our friends. I find the quaint, semi-cubist looks of the Spotted Owlet charming, and its noiseless flight and bold behaviour interest me. Others may not have my tastes (maybe mine are depraved) but surely a bird so useful about the house and garden, and such an efficient check on obnoxious insects, deserves to be encouraged—and shooting it on sight is no way to encourage any bird.

M. KRISHNAN

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK POSTBAG

A Question Of Locality

I HAVE been contradicted authoritatively over my suggestion that spring comes to the scrubland with the calendar year (January) and not with the official year (April). Mr S. Percy-Lancaster of Calcutta, the well-known horticulturist, asks: "Am I wrong in supposing that these paragraphs refer to plants that flower in spring i.e. January? If so, I fear I must challenge Mr Krishnan; he will never find flowers on *Gloriosa* till June at the earliest as the tuber is dormant till the early hot weather. *Abrus* may have last year's seed pods hanging on to it, *Thunbergia alata* and *fragrans* will be in bloom, but it is doubtful about *Justicias* and *Ruellias*. The *Henna* waits for the hot months; so too do *Carissa* and *Capparis*." He thinks I am about a month or six weeks out for spring.

I have always felt a powerful reluctance to enter into arguments with Doctors and Professors and the secretaries of learned societies. Not that I am awed by their status, but such men have the most discouraging and unfortunate habit of being in the right, and their knowledge is ponderous and precise. However, I do not think I was mistaken in my observation—where I went wrong was in not making it clear that I wrote of a particular area, in the heart of the Karnatak, and that my observation was local.

Moreover, I pointed out that "water supply, soil and climate all influence the flora of the scrub profoundly." I feel that Mr Percy-Lancaster has not made sufficient allowance for the wide climatic and soil variations that obtain in this varied country. Another botanist from Bengal, Cunningham, says "in respect to the rainy season; the time of its onset and the amount of water which it brings vary greatly in different areas, so that no description of the climatic events in any particular region can be regarded as applicable to the country at large." I am not seeking to justify careless observation with quotations. I admit straightaway that Mr Percy-Lancaster is right about the *Gloriosa*. The aerial parts die down after fruiting, and sprout again only after the rains.

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Had Mr P-L challenged me to find the *Gloriosa* in flower in December-January, I think I could have found it, for I have seen this plant in vivid bloom on the Ramgad foothills in the Sandur area late in December, and in the first week of January—but of course what he says is that the plant flowers only after June. The question is, when does it cease to be in flower? This serves to make my point about climatic variations. Maybe the *Gloriosa* flowers in July-August-September in Bengal, as I believe it does in Ooty, but in the Madras area it starts flowering late in October and fruits late in December. I have, naturally,

verified these statements before making them.

I too have seen the *Henna* (*Lawsonia alba*) in flower in summer, but in the southern scrub it starts flowering before the onset of hot weather. The bush in my garden burst into abundant, fragrant bloom in mid-January. I mentioned the *Carissa* and *Capparis* only to say they were thorny and typical of the drier scrub; that they are all the year round.

Ruellia tuberosa is in flower in Madras—many of the plants are also in fruit in January. *Justicia procumbens* (I did not write in January, of garden varieties) is at its flowering peak and forms lovely patches where it grows together, with its pale violet, tiny flowers against its tiny leaves. Other minute-leaved, herbaceous plants at their flowering peak in December-January that are commonly found in the scrub in patches are *Euphorbia rosea*, and the gorgeous, blue-flowered, creeping *Evolvulus alsinoides*. Beauty is much a question of tastes, but I think the loveliest of them all is *Indigofera enneaphylla*, which forms carpets a yard each way at times, and has dark rose, irregular flowers studding the green of its spread—the flowers turn an indigo blue as they shrivel and fade.

My point was that in January it is spring in the scrub, especially in its herbaceous undergrowth. That may not be true of all India—it cannot be—but generally the less woody of the scrub's flora, and many of the woody ones too, do come into their flowering peak in December-January.

*

From Fr. Rosner, Ranchi, comes a most interesting account of close association between birds of different feather. He found a *Nukta* (Comb Duck) associating with a pair of Ruddy Shelduck (Brahminis), and when he dropped the *Nukta*, the pair of Ruddy Shelduck showed no inclination to leave their late comrade, circling around for quite a while. He remarks, quite rightly, that this is an unusual instance of bird behaviour, for while it is known that a Ruddy Shelduck (which pairs for life) will continue to haunt the neighbourhood when its mate is shot, it is strange that this pair should have shown similar attachment to a *Nukta*, "worlds apart in habits and tastes." Fr. Rosner also remarks on the scarcity of Common Teals and Ruddy Shelduck in his area this year, and wonders if there was similar scarcity in other areas.

It is well-known that in certain birds (particularly, monogamous birds) one of a pair will haunt the scene of its mate's death—the Sarus provides a ready example. However, close association between animals need not have a sexual motive, and associations of different species of birds and beasts have been observed.

Such social and personal relationships, especially individual attachments in unrelated animals, provide a fascinating field of study, of which we know little. There are few genuine reports, from scientific observation, on such associations; though there are a good few romantic stories about them in shikar books and elsewhere! Fr. Rosner's account is especially interesting for this reason, and I shall be grateful for other genuine reports on such partnerships. Of course, only reports based on accurate, personal observation are of any worth—though the theme is a tempting one.

I am no wildfowler and have little personal knowledge of duck, but hope I am scientist enough to face possible ridicule when there seems to be the possibility, however slight, of known facts not pointing in the obvious direction. Most probably Fr. Rosner's Ruddy Shelduck lingered on waiting for their lost comrade. But I would like to know if Ruddy Shelduck are more reluctant to leave a favourite haunt when disturbed than other duck—the observation of some outstandingly poor marksman who has disturbed them repeatedly with gunfire, without dropping a bird, would be of real value.

M. Krishnan



February Moon

THERE is a saying in Tamil warning all men against these four things, as things especially untrustworthy: "the February moon, the courtyards of those that ignore you, the love of a harlot and the friendship of a trader". The wisdom of old Tamil over the last three is obvious, but one may ask, "Why the February moon?" Because of its deceptive allure.

Never at any other time of year, not even in November, is moonlight so seductively brilliant, so full of luminous soft magic. And never is the change from the sullen heat of day to the dew-laden coolness of night so potent in its unhealthiness than in February, at least, not in the South. I learn traditional wisdom the hard way, and know, from experience, that one can take harm from being out under the February moon. And it seems remarkable that in a very different

I am afraid I have more to ask than to tell on this question. Though given to late hours and nocturnal walks, all that I have noticed can be said in a few sentences. Many night drives along hill-jungle roads have left me with the impression that wild animals are less prone to take man-made tracks on a bright night than when it is dark. This is only an impression, but others with whom I compared notes had it too. Some birds, ordinarily diurnal, are active under a radiant moon: this is a thing about which I can be definite. I have often seen and heard crows, lapwings and cuckoos (not the Koel only, but other cuckoos also) on moonlit nights—less frequently the tree-pie, the cuckoo-shrike, the common partridge and the commoner village hen!

The stone-curlew is a bird of the dark, but is specially vocal on such nights and flies about then, and some water birds are similarly affected. No doubt the activity of these birds is due to visibility being good—birds are much dependent on sight, and one can read print by a bright moon. It is well-known that pigeons cannot fly in the dark, and need clear light. I have tried releasing homers by moonlight, but though tossed within a mile of their loft the results were discouraging: they want daylight.

Not all animals are equally susceptible to the call of the moon. What intrigues me is not so much the identity of all animals that are, as what they do when they are out under a round moon. Naturally, the assiduous prowler by moonlight will see many nocturnal creatures, if he is lucky—hares, field-mice in plenty, jackals, mongooses, jungle-cats, perhaps even a civet or palm-civet—but he sees them on such nights only because visibility is good: they are out every night, but go unseen in the dark. It is difficult to gauge any exuberance in their behaviour that one can attribute, reasonably, to the moon, because beasts are silent as a rule and moreover they are self-conscious and will not stand being watched. But the birds that respond to moonlight are vocal, and they do seem to be in high spirits.

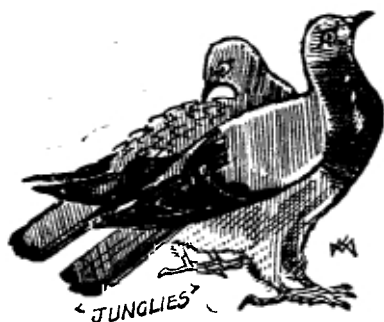


M. Krishnan's Country Notebook

climate a saying similar in motive and period should obtain: the English "Cast not a clout ere March is out" does not refer to lunar influence, but is similar fundamentally. However, I do not write of men and moonlight. When I think of it, the response of men (and women) to the call of the full moon saddens me: unmindful of the many rich lyric passages in every Indian language linking moonlight with erotic impulse, they lug their dinner to the terrace and consume it there; and this is the only reaction to lunar light I have noticed among my fellows. But are the more natural birds and beasts equally uninfluenced or prudent?

Watching crows and other birds, it is difficult to get over the feeling that it is not the prospect of more food that the extra hours of light bring (food is never unwelcome, of course, if it lies to beak) but just the moonlight that moves them. They fly noisily about from treetop to treetop, never coming down to earth or any obvious business. We know that birds are capable of play, and rejoice in certain settings: can it not be that moonlight stimulates the joie de vivre in them?

All this is speculation. I do not know if anyone has done any serious work on animal response to moonlight, but I think I can contribute a suggestion, if not a fact. I believe that in spite of their wonderful equipment for extremes of temperature, crows and other "moonlight" birds are less active under a February moon than in other months. Perhaps it is the heavy, humid atmosphere that damps their wings and spirits.



BLUE MOSQUE-PIGEONS

WHEN I come back to the city from some far countryside, as I seem to be doing quite often these days, I have opportunities for observing the gradual degeneration of the Blue Rock-Pigeon from a thoroughbred to a mongrel. Away from mixed city communities and the lofts of fanciers, the Blue Rock is true to type—in places it is true to name as well, and lives among precipitous rocks.

I know some of these rock colonies, and have reared squabs, taken from dark caves, in my loft. Such birds are proportionately longer (because of longer and less tightly shut tails) than domestic breeds that resemble them (say, the Homer) and stand lower to the ground. Their stance is somewhat crouched, and they run swiftly along the ground unlike domestic pigeons. I think their flight feathers are softer than in racing pigeons—they do not make that laughing noise when they take off quite so audibly. And their flight is distinctive, swift, direct and low in the air—they do not circle much and fly point-to-point. The wing action

M. KRISHNAN'S COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

is less smooth than in Homers and more up-and-down, more like a Tumbler's. These are the distinctive features of the authentic Blue Rock that I have noticed over years of occasional observation—and I would still hesitate to name a given bird as a true "jungly" on sight.

For no bird has bred so promiscuously with its own changed offspring as this pigeon. When the Emperor Babar stopped his conquest for a moment to comment upon the differences in looks and voice between the rock-pigeons of his native land and India, he was better placed than I, for they were less interbred here then. All breeds of domestic pigeon have been evolved from the Blue Rock, and if you allow half-a-dozen fancy breeds to mingle freely, their progeny will revert ultimately to the ancestral rock type. In urban areas rock-pigeons colonise mosques and temples, and interbreed with other domestic pigeons to form mongrel colonies.

(Continued from previous col)

type, so that it is not possible to say whether the pigeons of a city colony are genuine "junglies" or atavistic reversions. More than once I have made up my mind to study the pigeon community of a mosque seriously, but have never stayed long enough near it to accomplish anything.

Of course it is not only mosques that hold Blue Rocks and semi-wild pigeons. Any place that offers them nesting sites and security will do for them. The spires of Hindu temples and the parapeted and domed architecture of an older and more decorative age offers them hospitality at times. Often you may find semi-wild pigeons using some dome or spire as a daytime resort regularly, without settling down to breed. With plenty of niches, holes and crevices to provide them with nesting sites, such conduct may seem arbitrary and whimsical, but it is the instinct of self-preservation that keeps the birds from settling there. If you look closely you will find ledges and heavy moulding in the architecture, near these holes, that will serve cats and other predatory beasts with easy promenades.

Wild pigeons are canny birds. A multitude of predators seek them in the air and on their breeding grounds. The fact that they are still numerous is a testament to their

Country Notebook

"Sumer is icumen in"

THE last days of February were unusually warm and dry in Bangalore. Old residents, are hoping that the weather will turn cooler soon, and less uneven, for the rare early summer in Bangalore endures and is warm. In this salubrious climate the hot weather begins about April, and soon after the "mango showers" arrive to tone it down. This year, I am afraid, they are in for a long, hot spell, for I have been hearing the Coppersmiths lately and at the beginning of this month I heard them calling steadily through the noon, announcing to all that summer had opened formally.



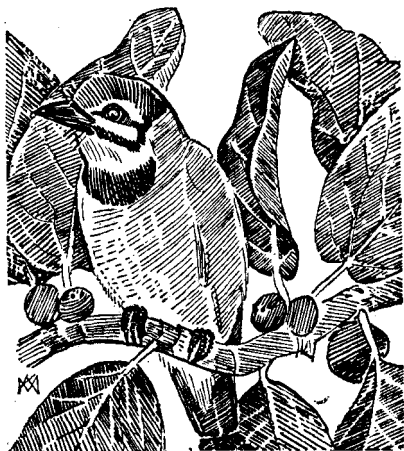
The Coppersmith may be justly called the voice of summer. Not only in Bangalore, but all over India, this little, vivid barbet grows vocal as the hot weather sets in, and then, till it is cool again, you hear its metallic, monotonous "tonk . . . tonk . . . tonk . . ." right through the fiercest hours of day. Summer has many voices in our country: the koel (though this bird is more typical of mid-summer spring), the Brain-fever Bird, the ardent roller, palm squirrels, even the Coppersmith's larger cousin, the Common Green Barbet, which says "kukur . . . kukur . . . kukur . . ." instead of tonking and says it later into the evening. But none of them, I think, is so sure a sign of summer's onset as the midday voice of the Coppersmith. Of course, any bird may be deceived into a false start by capricious weather, and a succession of summery days may start Coppersmiths calling, but birds are conservative in such matters and their perceptions are sound—when these barbets are calling steadily at noon, a sustained "tonk . . . tonk . . ." that goes on unflinchingly down to the foot of this page, it is a reliable indication, and that is why I am confident that summer has arrived to stay in these parts.



The Coppersmith is a gaudy bird, green above and yellowish below, with a crown and bib of true scarlet, crimson feet, a black-bordered yellow patch around each eye, and a thick dark bill. As if to compensate for this exuberance of colouring, it is remarkably squat and economical in build, with no plumes and appendages beyond a bristling moustache. "Coppersmith" describes its voice admirably, but its other name, the Crimson-breasted Barbet, is inadequate. However, the official title, *Xanthocheilus haemacephala*, does justice to its colouring and bloody crown.

Figs of various kinds have an irresistible appeal to this bird, and it is fond of the shady sanctuary of fig

trees. It has been rightly said that in spite of its vivid patches the Coppersmith's colouring is assimilative—in its favourite haunt, the Banyan in red fruit, its plump silhouette is almost invisible against the broad green leaves and bright, rounded fruit. The bird throws its head about while calling, and it is true that because of this habit it is hard to say from which tree it is calling when one is at some distance.



but from near or under its tree it is easy to spot the Coppersmith from its voice.

Like all barbets, the Coppersmith is strictly arboreal. I do not think it ever comes down to drink. Often, in the blistering heat of a Madras April afternoon, I have wondered how it can call so persistently, with not a drop to ease its parched throat. A vendor of dried figs once told me that the fruit was excellent for summer heat and cooling in the extreme—I have the uncharitable feeling that had I met him during the rains, he would have assured me that a diet of figs was the thing for the wet and cold; but perhaps there was truth in what he said.

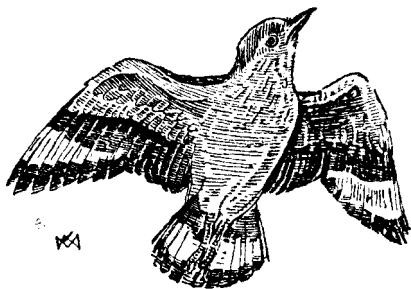
M. KRISHNAN

Country Notebook

MARCH ROLLER

THE March Hare, my dictionary tells me, gets its name for madness from its "gambols during the breeding season". I wonder what the sedate scholarly men who made the book would have said, confronted with the March Roller. Perhaps, for all their words, the sight would have left them speechless.

For the Roller is a sedentary bird at other times, respectable, even gentlemanly in a lazy sort of way. All day long it sits on some exposed perch, drab, squat and inert, indifferent to the blazing sun and the breeze that ruffles its plumage. I have seen a Roller knocked off its balance and



post by a gust of wind, pick itself up in the air and resume its seat in the open, in the most off-hand manner. From time to time it comes out with a deep chortle (not a specially refined sound, but guttural enough to have tonal strength), but nothing breaks its bored, slumped repose otherwise. Even when it sights some passing insect and gives chase, bursting into dazzling blues with the spread of its pinions and tail, there is nothing hurried or undignified about its movements—it flaps lazily along on broad, sapphire and azure wings, like some gigantic butterfly, takes its prey casually from the air, and then flaps its way back to its pole. What is gentlemanliness, after all, but a superiority to crude emotional displays (or its affectation when others are looking)? The Roller has it, even when feeding. Till late in March.

Then, all at once it sheds its reserve, and becomes a thing demented. Love is a powerful influence: even in the highest animals it has been known to induce a sudden, abandoned silliness. In birds, however, whose

emotional lives are not screened by reason or self-consciousness, it often reaches its climax of expression in aerial displays and melody. There is a quickening pattern leading up to a grand finale in their courtship displays, or else an undercurrent of audible, welling fervour.

But the courting Roller goes plain crazy, abandons its perch, and flies about with maniac energy and aimlessness. It scours the heavens, not in soaring circles, not in steep, acrobatic loops, but just anyhow. The broad wings lose their good-natured flapping action, and beat a pathless course for the bird through the air. At times it flies high and wild, when the colours of its flights and tail grow invisible and dark against the sky. So lost are its blues in the distance, so unlike its lubberly self is it on the wing now, that one who has not seen an ardent Roller before could mistake it for some other bird.

And not content with this exhibition of incoherent flight, the Roller sings—all the time it is flying—in an incredibly hoarse voice. At no time has it a pleasant voice, but usually it is discreetly laconic. In March, however, it sings as it flies, and its song is even more pointless than its flight; but fortunately confined to a single note, a long-drawn, grating shout. It climbs into the sky and dives recklessly earthwards, singing its harsh song unceasingly—on a still day you can hear the courting Roller from half-a-mile away, and the increase in volume of the song alone is sufficient to tell you of its headlong descent. There are many unaccomplished musicians among birds, but few with such a raucous or persistent voice. However, it is the voice of love, inspired by the same feeling that prompts the nightingale and the lark.

Luckily, the inspiration passes. Once it mates and nests—the event varies with place and climate, but is from April to July—the Roller settles down to the business of perpetuating the species, a thing that it does with its usual sang-froid, and it has no time for giddy flights and song. Later still you will find it on some pole in the sun, so staid and sober that you would have passed the bird by, but for a deep-throated chuckle.

M. KRISHNAN

"Inheritor Of Unfulfilled Renown"

APRIL is neither girlish nor golden here. Even in the cool blue hills a fecund restiveness is in the air: great forest trees burst into sudden, opulent bloom and the voice of the Koel is heard in our land. I am tempted to end these reminiscent, echoing sentiments in a rank bad pun, and I think I will yield to temptation—spring is here, the main spring of life in India.

But, in spite of an acquaintance with classical poetry, I shall not write of Koels and red Asokas, Jasmines and Champaks and the flowering of the mango (give me the fruits) or balmy breezes (give me the breeze, bar the loo, would be balmy just now). Instead, I shall tell you of a fascinating little puppy that I saw this morning, with one ear cocked and the other drooping, and not too certain a gait. About this time of the year, I have seen this puppy many times in the past, in distant and different places, in Banaras, in Fatehpur Sikri, in Rameswaram; but never before was it quite so lopeared or wobble-footed or friendly. This little one, like its archetypal predecessors belongs to an earlier spring. I must be careful in what I say, for dogs breed all the year round, but so far as the common dogs of the country are concerned the rush is about December. And so, in April we find these puppies, weaned, and exploring the world on gawky limbs.

★

What sort of dogs will they grow into, and what lies ahead of them? I think I can answer these sweeping questions, having had opportunities for observing canine communities in rural parts. Many of these charming puppies die young: infant mortality is shockingly high among them. Those that reach maturity will be stocky, short-coupled, middle-sized dogs, from 18 to 22 inches at the shoulder and weighing from 30 to 45 lbs. Some of them will find homes and owners and grow into regular house-dogs, others will lead a less tied up life as herd-dogs, and the rest will belong to no one in particular but to some locality, vagrant and semi-parasitic on the human settlement but not nomadic, and roped in occasionally to watch over the groundnut fields at night or for hunting. These, all of them, are the typical "Pariah dogs" of Indian plains (and of some of our hills as well), varying little in type over their wide range.

Everyone knows them, and so I will not describe them, but I would like to say that an all-white dog, or a dog with much white on it, is not a true Pariah—typically, the dogs are brown, from a pale, fulvous fawn to a deep burnt umber colour, and a few may be brindled or black, but I suspect the blood of dogs with too much white in their coats. The mongrel communities of towns and cities contain only a percentage of Pariah blood in them. The breed is loosely defined and undeveloped, but herd-dogs in the villages are generally typical specimens.

★

In other countries (in Germany and Australia, for instance), the pastoral dogs have been bred to a high standard of canine perfection. Welsh Corgis, Collies, Alsations, the Australian Kelpie and Cattle-dog, are all breeds evolved from pastoral stock. In India, nothing has been done to improve the likely stock available all over the land, in rural areas. The Pariah dog, by virtue of its square, sensible build and handy size, is admirably suited for utilitarian purposes. It is sagacious, very



even-tempered, and extremely hardy. Only those who do not know it will hold its courage in contempt: I feel that urban mongrels are largely responsible for the lowly reputation of "Pi-dogs". Not that these dogs are highly thought of or cared for in the countryside, but the few that are well fed and looked after develop into strong, hard-muscled dogs. In packs these dogs are capable of great things.

Packs of these dogs are still used to hunt pig, and even leopards, in remote, jungle-clad places. I used to know several pig-hunting Pariah dogs rather well, and can vouch for their pluck—in company. When alone, they are too sapient to rush in where the odds are great, but they make excellent watch-dogs.

★

Not the least of its merits is the fact that the breed can thrive on a cheap, mixed diet, and is indifferent to the heat of the plains (a quality that seems vitally important, and almost heroic, to me just now). Far finer dogs—the southern Poligar and other indigenous hounds—have declined for lack of popular interest. Is it likely that we shall take on the up-hill job of establishing and popularizing the comparatively poor-looking Pariah? At first the Pariah's cause seems a hopeless one, but I advocate it still, because of the all-round virtues and great potentialities of the breed. Moreover, no dog that is so delightfully attractive in its puppyhood can be wholly without a future.

M. Krishnan

Voices Of Intolerance

I am a good neighbour. In this overcrowded city, hemmed in on all sides with the houses of other men, I am impercipient. Especially do I take no note of the uproars that break out around me from time to time—I presume these are signs of life's onward march here, just as the grating sounds from around the corner are tokens of the progress of trams, and I am incurious. But on Friday morning I was awoken by such a varied and sustained din that over-coming my civic sense I rushed to the backyard and looked over the wall.

The hubbub came from a Cassia in the compound of my neighbour to the east. A number of crows and Rose-ringed Parakeets had assembled about the tree, and in its top branches, circling round, settling, and circling again, screeching, screaming, cawing, and demonstrating at something that sat lumped, indistinct and immobile in the heart of the tree. The something was almost completely hidden by foliage and flowers—it looked large, whatever it was, and apparently it knew there was little calm outside the screen of leaves. I took a quick census of the demonstrators, since the object of their attentions was invisible. The crows (mainly grey-necks) kept flying in and out and were too numerous to be counted, but there were about two dozen of them, and there were seventeen parakeets. A surprising number, for although parakeets visit the neighbourhood, they do not roost here, and I had not thought the locality held so many of them.

*

For a few minutes I had to rest content with watching the demonstration, for the cause of it all gave no clue of its identity—I guessed it was a large owl that had strayed into the neighbourhood, incautiously. Then unable to suffer the prying eyes and the many-keyed curses of the birds, it broke cover, climbing down surprisingly to earth, a young three-fourths-grown Bonnet Monkey, with half its tail missing, that raced across my neighbour's compound and streaked up the wall, and from it up the tall coconut tree in the corner of my backyard. Promptly the frenzied crows and parakeets shifted en masse to the coconut, and with a plainer view of their quarry demonstrated against it even more agitatedly.

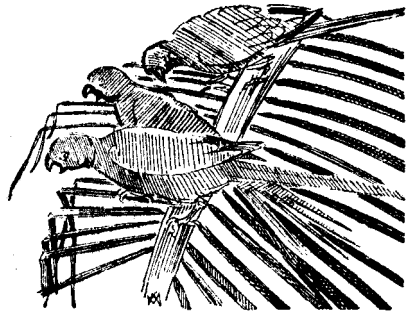
There are no monkeys hereabouts—this one must have been a runaway from some gipsy's troupe. From the coconut to the great wood-apple tree in my compound, from there through a row of coconuts to a mango, and finally to the concrete parapets of my western neighbours, the fugitive took its wretched liberty, never descending to earth again, seeking the cover of foliage from the tormentors—and the birds followed every move in its progress in a vociferous mob. Only when that harassed monkey took to the house-tops, abandoning green sanctuary, and disappeared westwards to where there were no trees, did they stop heckling him. Then all at once the chivving ceased, as suddenly as it had begun some half an hour earlier.

At first all this may seem trifling, and hardly worth the record, but I feel the incident is not without interest to the naturalist. For one thing, this was the first time I had seen parakeets demonstrating at a monkey, or any other creature, for that matter. Dewar, I think, mentions an instance

of Rose-ringed Parakeets panicking at their roost, when a hawk took one of them, but this was something quite different. Though there were many more crows there, the varied voices of the parakeets almost drowned their cawing, and the crows seemed half-hearted in their heckling, by comparison. They just flew in from neighbouring perches to the monkey's tree, and then out again, but each parakeet, before settling, circled the tree on stiff-held wings, with every long graded tail-feather outspread, heaping shrill curses on the unhappy macaque's head: they sat in rows craning over to peer through the leaves at their quarry till their heads seemed disproportionately big on the taut, thin necks, yelling vituperations, almost toppling off their perches in their excitement.

*

I cannot imagine why these birds were so affected by the monkey—in the countryside where they lead an arboreal existence together, I have never seen them demonstrating at macaques. Anything out of place excites the birds of a locality, and certainly that monkey was utterly



strange in that setting, but this does not seem to explain the obvious anger of the parakeets. The crows were merely a subsidiary force, drawn to the scene of action by the parakeets—they were, as I said, almost casual in their protests.

*

Another remarkable fact was the complete indifference of other creatures present. I noticed that the numerous squirrels of my compound, and a party of White-headed Babblers there just then, utterly ignored the monkey and its tormentors. Palm-Squirrels and White-headed Babblers are notoriously more given to demonstrating against enemies and intruders than parakeets, but they showed no interest whatever.

Even more remarkable was the apathy of the human population. A gardener's child threw a small stone vaguely in the direction of the monkey, as it leaped from one coconut tree to another overhead, but this was a purely formal gesture, prompted by some dim, atavistic obligation to throw things at fugitive creatures. After performing this rite, the child took no further notice of the monkey, well within his puerile range. No one else seemed even aware of the commotion in tree and air. One of my neighbours was shaving at a window seat, and got up—I hoped he would step on to his terrace to see what it was all about—but it was only to get a towel before resuming his toilet.

M. KRISHNAN.



SHOWER BATH

I came here early in April, to keep my annual date with the southern summer. For a week all went well: slowly the budding heat burgeoned. Then suddenly massed clouds rolled up overhead and the rain came down in torrents. A passing shower, I said to myself while it rained three inches, and it passed. The sun burned fiercely in a clear sky next day, and the heat was all the more apparent for the interlude. But since morning it has rained again today, the sky is overcast, the air cool, and it looks as though I must wait for my assignation.

Sitting on my leaky verandah I have been watching birds in the rain. I happen to have Dewar's "Birds of the Indian Plains" with me just now—he has a chapter on "Birds in the Rain" in the book, and perhaps he wrote it not far from here. I would like to observe something original about the reaction of the birds around me to the shower, but such things do not go by preferences and I have to confirm Dewar largely. He says that birds enjoy the rain acutely, and that in India it is rarely that they are forced to take shelter from it. "They know naught of rheumatism or ague", they sit in the rain or splash about in puddles, delighted with the opportunity for a shower-bath, and afterwards there is a great shaking out of feathers and preening of wings, and they are smart and fresh and glad. Dewar also comments on how the first monsoons bring feasts of termites and other insects for birds and nestlings, and softens terra firma for the probing bill of the hoopoe,



All this is true. An odd group of three Common Mynahs have been parading the gravel path outside for the past hour, wading into every puddle and splashing about, as if trying to drown themselves in the knee-high water, and still they are not drenched—their well-oiled plumage seems

waterproof. I can hear the neighing call of a White-breasted Kingfisher, and know where it is—on top of a Casuarina pole in the back yard. Far out, in a field beyond the road, a flock of Cattle Egrets alight on dazzling wings, surprisingly white in this grey atmosphere, and quarter the wet grass. There are crows on exposed perches all around, determined not to miss a drop of the rain. The only birds I can see that do not seem too keen on a shower-bath are a party of White-headed Babblers, sheltering under a mango.

Watching these birds, it is obvious that Dewar wrote about their reaction to rain from accurate observation, but I cannot help feeling that he assigned a wrong motive for their behaviour. It is no craze for originality that makes me say this—it is that I can see no patent signs of joy in these rain-bathing birds. The lives of birds are ruled by instincts mainly, and their responses and emotional expressions follow set patterns.

There is a crow sitting on a dead limb of a Neem not twenty yards from me, and I have been observing it closely for the past half-hour. It has been sitting there dully, unmoving except to fluff its plumage or caw in a sad undertone from time to time—the illustration is from a leisurely sketch of this obliging model. Now, if this crow is enjoying the shower, I must say it takes its pleasures sadly: Poe's raven could hardly have made a less sprightly picture, had it been out there, on that branch.



Nor can I note any tokens of jubilation in the other birds out in the rain. Dewar says that the normally sedate mynahs shed their reserve when it rains, and go mud-larking in abandoned enjoyment. I am alive to the tonic properties of slush and downpour—it does one's soul good to get drenched and splashed with mud, for all ponderous unlovely notions of self-importance and dignity are shed at once, and this sudden jettisoning and the feeling of lightness that follows move one to frisk about and find life joyful. But I think the mynahs I see are undignified only because they are bathing, bathing vigorously in two-inch-high water—few beasts or birds (bar all cats) look their best at their toilet.

Birds are wonderfully equipped for extremes of climate and weather. And they enjoy dust-baths. But that is not saying that they may feel no discomfort from clogging dust and secretions in their plumage. Is it not likely that their addiction to rain is an unreasoned response, an instinctive utilisation of an opportunity to wash away dust and water-soluble accumulations from their feathers and skins? That would explain their "non-enthusiastic" but sustained insistence on exposing themselves to the first rains after every spell of dry weather.

WHISTLING IN THE DARK?

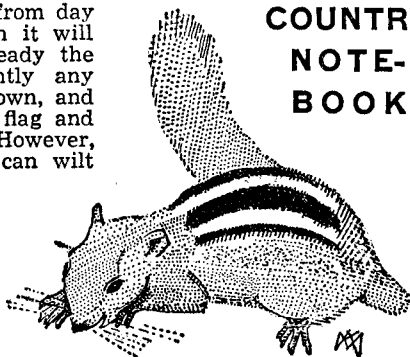
by M. KRISHNAN

THE heat gains strength from day to day, inexorably. Soon it will reach its sure climax: already the mornings open, not brightly any more, but with a sultry frown, and by 10 o'clock most spirits flag and most voices are stilled. However, there are spirits no heat can wilt and voices gaining fluency just now. The Koel, which was stuttering in April, is in full, fervid song, and alone among the mammals Palm Squirrels cheep shrilly and maddeningly through the fierce day.

Not that they are immune to the heat. Often I see a squirrel resting in leaf shade at noon, inert and flat on its belly along a bough, legs dangling down either side, strangely like some furred bloodsucker in its limpness of limb and attitude. Presently it rises, and climbs the branch to the roof of my verandah, and halts on a rafter under the flat, radiant tile. Then, all at once, a series of long, startling cheeps rend the stillness, each accompanied by an upward flick of the bottle-brush tail. From somewhere under the tile of my neighbour comes an answering volley of cheeps, and the duet is on, each chirrup cleaving its way through the quivering air with the physical violence of an arrow, and penetrating to the brain. I get up, and chuck the first thing handy at the grey form on the rafter, and it scampers away, jabbering shrilly—a minute later it is calling again from the roof of the garage.

Why do these creatures assail the enervated mid-day silence with energetic voices, when even the crows are quiet? At no time are Palm Squirrels shy or silent: they chatter intermittently through the day, and even at night, startled into wakefulness, they jabber. However, at other times their voices, even in shrill alarm, lack the irritating power and rhythmic insistence of their calling in May. I think their long, loud spells of calling in summer have a sexual signi-

COUNTRY NOTE- BOOK



ficance, but cannot assign a more specific cause. For though I have often heard the summer duet of squirrels, I realise that my observation is too meagre for certain inference or attribution. Speaking of the Three-striped Palm Squirrel (the creature I write about) an authority says: "The breeding habits of these, the commonest wild animals of India, are imperfectly known." I know, from several years of living with these creatures, that these squirrels breed many times in the year, and not always in summer. Only a week ago a baby squirrel, perhaps a few days old, wandered into my house, and I remember seeing baby squirrels, and watching adults carrying coconut fibre to the nest, at other times of the year. But I believe it is only in summer, mid-summer, that these squirrels are given to long bouts of calling.

Moreover, I know that both does and bucks indulge in this calling, and that it is not always squirrels of different sexes that call to each other. Perhaps these duets have only a social significance, after all. It is well known that animals that live more or less together like to keep in touch by the free and frequent use of their voices, and it may be that feeling suddenly alone and uneasy in the hush of noon the squirrels start their insistent chirruping, to reassure themselves and to provoke the voices of their fellows.

Country Postbag

H. H.B., Ishapur, is bothered by cuckoos. He hears them calling and wants to know what birds they are. One of them "has a four syllable call, 'Ku-hu, Ku-hu'" and he believes this is the Kokila or Indian Cuckoo,

"though some of the residents call it the Monsoon Bird." The other birds have calls which "can be variously described as 'Brain-fee-ver', 'Pee-pee-ha', 'Broken-pee-koe', 'Kypul-pukka', 'Bou-katha-kow' and 'Chok-gay-low'."

It is not always possible to be sure of the identity of a bird from traditional descriptions of its call, for the hearer, familiar only with the known rendering may attribute it to another bird with a similar voice. But almost all the calls given by H.H.B. are well-known renderings, and are, in fact, the onomatopoeic names for the birds in the vernacular. There is no doubt about two of the three birds he refers to. One of these is the Common Hawk-Cuckoo or Brain-fever Bird, whose insistent voice can never be forgotten, once heard. It is this same bird that says "Pee-pee-ha" and "Chok-gay-low"—Fletcher and Inglis give the vernacular names of this bird as "Pupiya in Hindi-speaking districts and Chokgallo in Bengal." The name is also rendered "Pa-pee-ha": Sarojini Naidu has written a fulsome lyric about the bird, under this name.

★

The Indian Cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*) is the other bird about which I am sure. Dewar says of this bird: "Blandford speaks of its call as a fine, melodious whistle. I would not describe the note as a whistle. To me it sounds like Wherefore, Wherefore impressively and sonorously intoned. The vernacular names, Bowkatako and Kypulpukka are onomatopoeic, as is Broken-Pekoe Bird, by which name the species is known to many Europeans."

That leaves us with the bird that says "Ku-hu, Ku-hu" and which is probably the Kokila or Indian

M. KRISHNAN answers
readers' natural history queries.

Cuckoo as per H.H.B. and the Monsoon Bird as per local residents. I do not think this bird is the Indian Cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*) or a close cousin I believe Pied Crested Cuckoos (*Clamator jacobinus*), which are known by the name, Monsoon Bird, are not commonly found in the area from which H.H.B. writes—moreover, their call, uttered from the wing, is not always four syllabled and cannot be rendered, fairly, into "Ku-hu, Ku-hu." It is just possible that that magnificent bird, the Red-winged Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator coromandus*) might be responsible for the call—Cunningham records it near Calcutta. But it seems likeliest, to me, that the Koel is the bird H.H.B. refers to. I have lived for years in places where the Koel is plentiful, and the hen has a rapid, excited four syllabled call that is not unlike the rendering "Ku-hu, Ku-hu". This call is heard commonly at the commencement of the hot weather.

★

Mrs A. G., Delhi, reports about an extraordinary association between a hawk and a human family. According to her report this association lasted for over sixty years, and the hawk, a semi-wild one, used to stay part of the time with the human family, and go foraging for itself for months on end. Unfortunately, no clue to the identity of the hawk is given. Hawks and falcons are long-lived birds, and it is possible this one was a trained bird that escaped, and later found a home with the friendly family with which it associated, from time to time—that would explain its remarkable attachment to the family.

I have not heard of any similar association. Will readers, who can give me authentic instances, please write in, with all available circumstantial details?



COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

POCKET DRAGONS

I KNOW an aged tamarind at the foot of a hill, far beyond the line of cultivation. No other tree grows nearby, not even sizable shrubs—the sour leaf fall of tamarind inhibits vegetation in the neighbourhood. Only stones and a few dwarf, woody, hard-bitten plants cover the ground beneath the tree; and here, on a sunny afternoon, I have seen more bloodsuckers together than I have anywhere else—basking flat on every stone immediately outside the circle of shade, or crawling about within it. Even in wet weather, sheltering under the great dome of the tree, I have been more acutely aware of the company of “garden lizards” than in any garden, though not in such unpleasant profusion as when it was sunny.

I have always wondered why bloodsuckers should foregather here in such strength, for the place is not specially rich in insect life or in anything else that is obviously attractive to these lizards. It is hard to get to know bloodsuckers, or understand their whims and prejudices, without being a bloodsucker oneself. They are different from other small common creatures, so given to fits of passion and rage, distrust and imbecile behaviour. But then this is hardly surprising. They belong, properly speaking, to an age when we were not there, when great lizards roamed strange forests, flowerless and with green grooved trunks, and waded through primeval swamps. Dragons in myths, and bloodsuckers in fact, are the survivals from that primitive past.

I used to think, in my ignorance, that these creatures had survived in such numbers, when so many of their betters had perished, because they were not good eating—that like the Keatsian nightingale they were immortal because “no hungry generations” trod them down! But I know now that predatory animals are less fastidious than I had thought. Hawks kill and eat these lizards when they can, other birds take them occasionally, and mongooses and small carnivora reduce their numbers. Sometimes, it is true, the killer does not eat its victim, but the bloodsucker’s looks provoke slaughter, however unpalatable its flesh. There is no survival value in not being eaten, if that does not mean immunity from attack.

In fact the only protection that a bloodsucker has, apart from its retiring disposition and formidable looks, is in its surroundings, in the tangled, thorny bushes and fences that it loves, and

into which it retires so promptly from its enemies. I do not know if anyone has commented on this before, but it is usually the male bloodsucker that leaves this protective cover, or strays far from it. Then, on the more exposed ground, the male tries escape first, but when no tree or bush is close by, it puts on an intimidatory display: it raises and lowers its flaming orange body endlessly on its livid legs and throws out its bloody jowls and dewlaps.

This display might well scare an impressionable foe, but the blackguardly Jungle Crow that attacks it has no susceptibilities. The bird hops behind its victim, and with a quick, sideways tug at the tail turns it over. The bloodsucker picks itself up, turns round and rushes open-mouthed at the tormentor, which side-steps the rush and repeats the attack on the long, obvious, unbreaking tail that is the lizard’s undoing. It is murder by slow degrees. Gradually the unfortunate creature is reduced to numb immobility, and the crow’s assaults grow bolder, till seizing its battered victim by the throat it flies away—to be mobbed by other crows.

Often, however, some thick-leaved tree at hand saves the bloodsucker. It is expert at putting a massive trunk between the onlooker and itself—it was only by reminding myself that I belonged to a higher stage in evolution, and could not allow my race to be disgraced by inferior patience and cunning, that I could get the sketch of a bloodsucker on a neem tree for the illustration (incidentally, it was a brilliant, pure chrome yellow, with a black half-collar and little red at its throat). Bloodsuckers climb spirally, a habit that baffles enemies (birds, especially) when they are on trees.

However, the males venture into the open quite often, resplendent in their frills and spikes and colour, and pay dearly for their daring. The ochreous females are bashful and sensitive to scrutiny as any pardanishin—they keep close to cover and they know, somehow, when they are being watched. The age of pointed morals is as surely spent as the reptilian age (thank heaven), but it is fact that it is the modesty of the females that keeps the race of bloodsuckers still alive.

M. KRISHNAN





M. Krishnan's

THE SUNDAY STATESMAN, JULY 1, 1951

Country Notebook

Postbag

WRITING from Jadavpur, near Calcutta, apropos the Postbag note of June 3 on cuckoos and their onomatopoeic Indian names, M.C.C. says that the Koel or Kokila is often confused with the Indian Cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus*—"Bo u kathokao" in Bengali), though it is only the latter that belongs to the same genus as the European Cuckoo (*C. canorus*—which is also found in the Himalayas). Wordsworth's "wandering voice". He points out that the Koel is *Eudynamis scolopacea* in Latin, and has no English name, but is still miscalled the Indian Cuckoo—he thinks this is because both are parasitic, both have calls that can be rendered "cuckoo" and both are associated with spring.

★

Well, M.C.C. is quite right over the generic affinity of the Indian Cuckoo with the English Cuckoo, the bird that inspired Wordsworth and Logan: incidentally, in Elizabethan days this bird had a different literary significance:

"Cuckoo, cuckoo!—O word of fear,
Unpleasing to a married ear!"

I have no wish to side-step M.C.C.'s point, and wander down the aisles of a literary causerie, but he mentions the cuckoo in English poetry, and it is more difficult to write of the Koel without poetic allusions than of any other bird.

★

Not the nightingale, not the lark has been so celebrated in verse: the poetry of every Indian language pays lavish tribute to the Koel. Indeed no classical Indian poet can write of love or springtime without mention of the bird. When I spoke of the Koel as a cuckoo I meant only that it belonged to the cuckoo tribe—the parasitic Pied Crested-Cuckoo and the non-parasitic Sirkeer are both cuckoos, though neither belongs to the genus *Cuculus*. I would also point out that the name Koel (it is *Kuil* in the South) is quite as onomatopoeic as "cuckoo". As for association with spring, in the Madras area (where Koels are singularly abundant, as Dewar remarks) the bird

is first heard in late March, or early in April, and persists through May, June, July and even August—and then the memory of its voice lingers in one's mind till March again! The Koels call throughout the breeding season, and they breed as long as the crows do.

★

However, M.C.C.'s main point was that it was wrong to call the Koel the Indian Cuckoo because that name belongs, scientifically, to *Cuculus micropterus*. That is quite so. It is even more wrong to call the Koel the Brain-fever Bird (*Hierococyx varius*), but this confusion of identity is also known. Indifferent observation, the love of cover of arboreal cuckoos, and lack of acquaintance with the tribe are responsible for such mistakes. Once the birds are known, it is impossible to confuse their voices.

In a subsequent letter M.C.C. adds that he has been studying the voice of the Koel lately and has noticed that "the male has two distinct calls: one is a long 'Ku-oo' uttered solitarily under cover of foliage; the other is a short 'Ku' repeated an arbitrary number of times in the mellow and pleasant voice of the cock. The hen's voice is shrill and high-pitched and its only call is a quickly repeated 'Kik' sometimes having a trilling 'Kukuk' in the end." He adds that the male and female usually respond to each other, though in the early hours of morning the entire Koel population of a place seem to indulge in a chorus.

★

The call notes of Koels have been well described in most textbooks, but at the risk of treading much-trodden ground I may add to M.C.C.'s succinct note. I take it the "Ku-oo" he refers to is the well-known crescendo of the cock, also syllabised as "K u i l-K u i l-K U I L", the "Koel's fluted song" of Edwin Arnold. Both cock and hen indulge in a torrent of "keka-rees" and "kik-kiks" when excited or alarmed, the hen's thin, high "kik" being distinctive. And the cock indulges in a longish shout, more like my conception of

a war-whoop than anything I have heard, at times.

★

There are less coherent calls, or rather these calls are stuttered incompletely sometimes, especially early in the season. According to Sarojini Naidu the Koel has yet another call. She writes of "the wild forest where upon the champa boughs the champa buds are blowing" (as these cussed flowers often will) and "K o i l-h a u n t e d river-isles where lotus-lilies glisten" and says the Koel sings "Lira! lree! lira! lree!". I have not heard this call.

★

It is the quality of fervid, restless excitement in its voice rather than any precise pattern of call or sweetness that makes the Koel the Voice of Spring. It is true that Koels call long before dawn, but if M.C.C. will keep awake on a moonlit night and listen, he will hear them calling at all hours of the night. Let me end this note, so frequent in literary allusions, with a rendering of the finest lines I know on spring unrest. The address is to a lover who asks for a story:

"Now, when the roving moon is out, and the soft south wind blows;

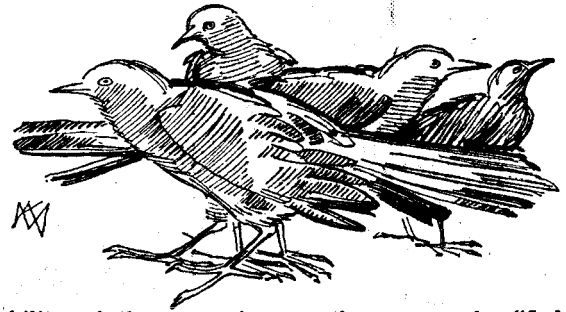
When sleep is fled;

And loud Koels usher in each watch of the night—

Now is no time for stories."

M. KRISHNAN'S "COUNTRY NOTEBOOK"

Birds Of A Feather



WHAT do you suppose would happen if you and half-a-dozen of your cronies were to dispense with all privacy for a week and spend the time together, each hour together, awake or asleep? Well, murder could happen, anything could with no decent interval of aloneness, but this is certain: At the end of the week, if you survived it, you and your fellows would have acquired an abandoned laxity of dress and conduct. Bristly chins and loose, amorphous clothes are inevitable, and your conversation would have changed to a babble. Prolong it to a fortnight, and you could never change back to your fastidious selves thereafter.

This is just what has happened to the White-headed Babblers. They live too much together to keep up appearances, and they care no more. Actually, they are not the frowziest members of the frowzy babbler family—that distinction must go to the

Jungle Babbler. But their long, straggling tails, their habit of hopping along with drooping wings, their lax plumage and weak flight all proclaim their caste, and they have the most unstable and querulous voices even among the babblers.

They cheep and chuckle thinly to one another, as they go rummaging about; and at times their conversation takes on a hushed and secretive tone—one could believe they were whispering and plotting, except that no one whispers in a high, weak tremolo. Then suddenly, and for no cause, they break into shrill, angry shouts and peals of hysterical laughter. There is a squeaky commotion in the bush, and a string of loose-feathered, long-hopping babblers emerges; the birds whirr and sail on rounded wings to the end of the garden, where they grow suddenly casual again, and turn over dead leaves in their usual, haphazard manner.

Birds are highly emotional for all their strong instincts, but usually their responses are un-

derstandable and follow a set pattern. Few of them have the giddy temperament and moral instability of these babblers, this patent weakness of wing and wits. But perhaps I do them an injustice, for recently I saw a half-fledged White-headed Babbler behave sensibly and coolly in the face of real danger. This little one was sitting in a tangled hibiscus bush, somehow separated from its elders, when a pair of evil-looking crows noticed it, and promptly commenced a combined attack. An infant of another kind might have panicked and rushed out into the beaks of the baby-snatchers, but this one knew when, and where, it was safe. It dropped into the close tangle of the lower branches where no thick crow could follow, and stayed put in spite of determined efforts to drive it out. Then all at once, and appraised in some mysterious way, a squealing, yelling, furious mob of babblers arrived, and flung them-

selves on the crows, who "fled precipitately". It is true that these birds can look like an old, faded feather mop with a few old quill pens stuck on at the tail end, true that they quarrel among themselves and have watery eyes and lunatic, white heads, but they have virtues that are not so common these days—courage, and unity in the face of danger. Every member of the wrangling clan will fling itself headlong at the raiding hawk that has seized a protesting babbler, and as a rule the rescue is effective. There is a mossy club somewhere—I think it is the Union Club, in Madura—that has a bundle of faggots in bas-relief over its door, to symbolise the unbreaking strength that comes from unity. A party of White-headed Babblers would, I think, make a more decorative and truer symbol of this sentiment.

M. Krishnan's COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

THE Large Grey Babbler, or "Gangai," is a bird of open hillsides and wooded scrub, and by no means a rara avis. Writing of it incidentally, Dewar remarks "This is commoner than I thought. It occurs in most districts of the U.P." In the Dharwar area and adjoining Karnataka tracts it is quite a feature of the countryside—its distribution in India is wide, in not so arid places. But still I can find no mention of this babbler in the lists of "Birds with Remarkable Cries" in books on Indian ornithology, which is remarkable, for few other birds so

dominate the locality where they live.

This is no dingy, unobtrusive bird, though it is a babbler and untidy, and it is not shy. Almost a foot long, it is a warm, blotched grey, rufescent on the cheeks, with dark rounded flights, an eye-streak that is clear when one is not too close or far away, and a long tail, broadly edged with white on either side, that is distinctive and most conspicuous in its frequent passage from bush to bush.

It loves the open, and does not skulk in the undergrowth or hide in foliage—you cannot miss this bold babbler, because of its size and blaze-edged tail; and even if you do, no matter, you will notice its fellows. For it is highly so-

ciable, even for a babbler, and goes about in parties invariably, in a loose string whether on the ground or bush or in the air. And then, of course, there is its voice. One would need to be stone deaf, and almost blind, to miss this bird where it occurs.

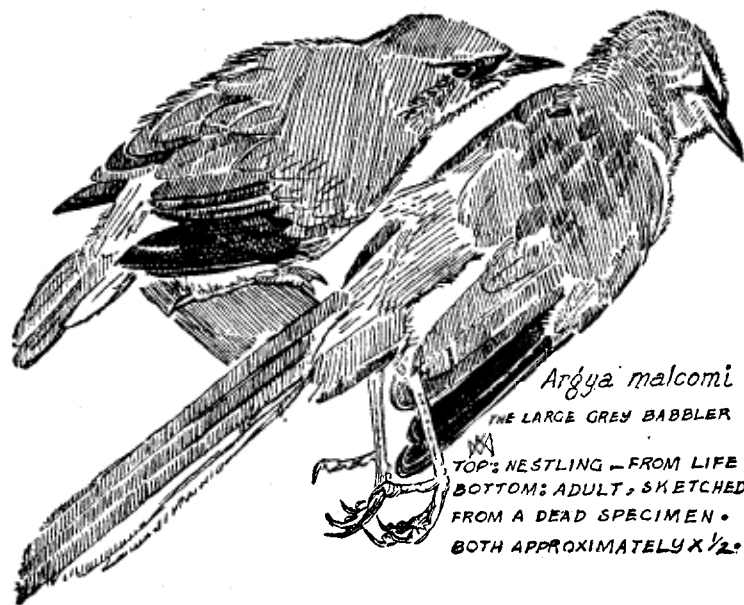
There are many birds in our country with compelling voices, but they pass. Spring, and the monsoons, resound in the countryside with the voices of cuckoos and rollers, and even the hot weather at its peak stimulates certain birds, notably the barbets. However these voices are stilled when the seasons are past—even the Koel is silent for six months. But rain or shine, the "quey, quey, quey" of the Large Grey Babbler is heard, in a chorus that persists right through the day. Only the night brings relief from their loud, insistent calling. If we could record the total amount of sound made by each bird in a year, I think this babbler would have the distinction of being the noisiest.

The call of this bird has been well rendered "a loud, harsh 'quey, quey, quey,'" and I suspect the native name ("Gangai") is onomatopoeic. But these renderings do not convey the whining rhythm of its voice—the nearest I have heard to it is the noise produced by a bull-roarer (the kind that has a clay cup with a tightly stretched membrane over its mouth, instead of a wooden block). I have also heard a motor car, stuck fast in mud, come out with somewhat similar sounds. The loud querulous whine of this bird's voice dies down and swells with that quality of mechanical repetition. And it is as untiring as a motor.

Like other babblers, the "Gangai" will unite in the face of

common danger, and since they are large and strongly built, hawks think twice before they decide to swoop down on a straggler. Once I saw a Shikra pounce on a Large Grey Babbler sitting on a bough, and the amount and volume of the victim's protests were astonishing. That Shikra was promptly mobbed by the rest of the clan, the victim (which seemed uninjured) joining in the chase, and only the superior speed of the hawk saved it.

These babblers breed in summer, perhaps they breed again, later in the year. The nest is not placed high up, but is usually in the heart of a thick, thorny shrub or tree, and well protected. The nestling sketched for this note was taken on July 14. It was then probably a fortnight old, and was just able to fly a few yards. Incidentally, the head is carried well up, with the crown flat, in the live bird—the jay-like pose of the head in the sketch from the dead, adult bird is never seen, and was unavoidable in the sketch as the bird was stiff.



Argya malcomi
THE LARGE GREY BABBLER
TOP: NESTLING—FROM LIFE
BOTTOM: ADULT, SKETCHED
FROM A DEAD SPECIMEN.
BOTH APPROXIMATELY X 1/2.

The Deluge

ABOUT mid-July I visited a hill-bound valley where I had lived for years, in the wake of a downpour. Spells of heavy rain, after the first monsoon breaks, are not unusual in this area. I can remember a day here when it rained 12 inches and many stone-in-mud dwellings collapsed, and other days when overmuch rain caused damage to fields and houses. But never within living memory had the place suffered such ravages as on that July Wednesday when $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches of thick rain came down in two hours.

The top-soil in the freshly sown fields had been shifted bodily by the rain to level hollows and ditches, or lay in a rich, spread sludge on a few fortunate, low-lying acres. The narrow, sunken river-bed (named "Nari-halla," the "girl-river" literally, because of its meek, effeminate course) had assumed incredible proportions in places, and trees had been uprooted and flung into the turbulent red torrent that roared along it, rising to unprecedented heights—like some bashful, retiring maid suddenly turned violent, storming virago.

At first sight the lesser life seemed to have suffered nothing, beyond passing inconvenience, by the deluge that had altered the familiar face of the countryside. Only after a week of looking about did I realise the toll it had taken of live things. In a ditch full of oozy silt I found hundreds of beetles and grasshoppers and other insects, slain by the rain. And in what served as a storm-water drain for a street there was a young, drowned Palm Civet—I have seen a drowned Palm Civet in a gutter, after heavy rains, once before: perhaps this creature lies up in subterranean retreats that are easily inundated.

What struck me most forcefully, on second thoughts, was the dearth of infant bird life. July is the month when one sees nestlings and newly-fledged birds here—not a single youngster did I see, flapping quickly in its gawky



passage from tree to tree. The older birds were there, quite sprightly and unconcerned, and their cheery abundance masked the lack of young birds from the casual eye. Two pairs of robins were courting gaily outside the room where I stayed. I found the remnants of a nest on a ledge of the building, exposed to wind and weather—very likely it had belonged to one of these pairs, and had held fledgelings not so long ago. Sunbirds and warblers were chasing through the garden in pairs, doves were indulging in their spectacular displays, coming down in a fan-tailed, spread winged corkscrew descent from high up in the tree tops, bulbuls were calling cheerily to their mates, and an Iora whistled to his, in a strikingly human tone. Obviously the birds were going through a forced, compensatory second spring.

Logically enough, the birds that nest in holes in wood, like the barbets and woodpeckers, seemed to have suffered little or nothing. I did not see their young in proof of their survival in safe places, but that proves nothing—I have never seen their young commonly so perhaps they come out of their holes only when full fledged. But I did notice a Brahminy Mynah flying down to the grass to forage, and returning to a hole in a tree with prey untiringly.

Allowing for everything I believe the downpour must have killed over 70% of the fledgelings here, a staggering loss of infant life.

Country Notebook

"THE FRETFUL PORPENTINE"

NOT being one of those untiring souls that raise vegetables and tubers in the countryside, or even a lover of flowering bulbs in orderly rows, I have never had to wage a personal war against porcupines. But I see them once in a way, motoring at night, and recently I saw them twice in my way, and was again impressed with their peculiar and effective manner of retreat.

Other animals caught in the beams of headlights stop to one side of the road and stop, dazzled by the glare, as if not sure of their suddenly bright ground. But the porcupine makes an immediate get away—there is a momentary pause and an out-bristling of quills, sometimes even a rattling of quills, and then the brute turns sharply and makes a bee-line for the nearest bush.

A porcupine in flight is a remarkable and indistinct sight—I can only think of a clockwork phantom in comparison. The stumpy, fast-moving legs are hardly visible beneath the quill-boosted body, and this, coupled with the linear directness of retreat, gives it the appearance of a thing on small wheels propelled by interior clockwork—and the outspread quills make it go suddenly pale and blurred and large. Half way to the bush, the apparition grows darker and smaller as the quills are allowed to fall back; it stops dead in its tracks, turns at a sharp angle, and bolts into another bush before one has time to recover from this surprise move. A wary beast and a cunning one is the "fretful porpentine," but of course its most peculiar feature is also its most obvious, the barrage of quills.

★

Those of us who own a small rectangular box with sides of parallel porcupine quills, or a porcupine-quill pen-holder, can have no idea of the resilience of these miniature lances on the live animal. A quill plucked from a newly killed porcupine can be bent into a "C" and will spring back into shape when one end is released. The stouter and shorter quills on the rear (these are more white, and near the tail these are all-white) are painfully sharp and strong enough to pierce deep into flesh.

I have never seen a porcupine attacking anything, but the story about its shooting quills at its enemies is just a story. Once I tried to irritate a captive porcupine into shooting quills at me, but naturally the poor thing could

only retire to the farthest corner of its cage to escape my prodding bamboo. Porcupines rush at their tormentors in reverse gear, and at great speed, spitting them through. It is obvious, from the lie of the quills, that they must charge backwards to make effective use of their protective armour. Like many other rodents, they have highly vulnerable heads.

Unfortunately for all concerned, porcupine flesh is much esteemed by the predatory wild beasts. Both the tiger and the panther will kill and eat porcupines—but extraordinary cases are on record of the great cats being mortally wounded by the quills. I think I can understand the mixed feelings of a feline sighting this spiky quarry. In my unsophisticated childhood, when I was sorely tempted by the vivid redness of the prickly-pear fruit, I had to face a similar problem!

★

The tracing from a photograph illustrating this note is of peculiar interest. On inquiry of the person who shot this panther, and the one who took the photograph, I learn the beast was shot at night over a bait, and under conditions which made a clear view of the head or immediate recovery of the body impossible. It was found dead next morning, a few yards from where it had been shot, and the porcupine quills were noticed only then. I am assured that a hard tug at the quills failed to dislodge them and that they were sunk an inch or more deep in the flesh—also, that the lowermost quill had penetrated to directly under the right eye-ball, so that when it was pushed about the eye was moved.

There is an instance on record of a porcupine attacking a dead leopard (also, of the two animals inhabiting the same earth on a basis of armed neutrality!) I am inclined to think that the leopard in the photograph was attacked after it was dead. Leopards (and all cats, unlike dogs) can turn their fore-paws around and clutch at things with them: I feel that the quills, painfully situated as they are, must have been disarranged or badly bent or even broken by the frantic efforts of the leopard to dislodge them, had it been alive when stuck. Only the apparently undisturbed appearance of the quills makes me think this. Perhaps readers who have personal knowledge of similar instances can shed further light on this not too obscure picture.

M. Krishnan



TRACED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH LENT BY H.H. THE RULER OF SANDUR —

A porcupine's quills in the face of a dead panther.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK POSTBAG

ARE TOADS POISONOUS?

CAN frogs, or toads, be poisonous, not just capable of causing cutaneous irritation, but deadly poisonous? I.A., from Arrah, raises this question in a letter, and says that some time ago he heard of a boy dying of frog bite. He says that so far as he knows frogs are non-poisonous, and that while toads can excrete an irritant fluid from their skins, this can cause nothing graver than acute irritation. He adds that even substantial inducements cannot move the boys of his place to catch frogs, because they think the reluctant bite of frogs is quickly fatal. I.A. goes on to suggest that the frog that bit the boy of Arrah might, in its turn and previously, have been bitten by a venomous snake, which might account for the fatal consequences.

★

Well, I think not. I.A.'s explanation seems too far-fetched. How could the poison in the frog's circulatory system, from the snake bite, have got into the boy's blood when it bit him? So far as I know, and a good many people with a quite formidable knowledge of batrachians know, there are no fatal frogs. Frogs have no fangs, only a row of small, conical teeth along the rim of the upper jaw: they cannot even chew. Anatomically they are incapable of a venomous bite. Toads are even less capable of this, since many of them lack the elementary teeth of the frogs. A pity, if you ask me, and a loss to the language. Only the words "you warty, low-down venomous toad!" can meet certain situations adequately, and biology bars their use.

★

Toads can, of course, excrete a milky, irritant fluid from the glands on their skins. This can be quite painful and consequential, but I am unable to find an instance of its killing anyone. Dogs are very sick after mouthing a toad, and I seem to remember having read of an American instance of a dog having died in consequence of attacking a toad—but I am unable to verify this. As I have pointed out before in these notes, the line that divides the frogs from the toads is very thin at times, almost non-existent in the case of tree-frogs (and tree-toads).

Perhaps the frogs of Arrah are, in reality, toads with touchy skins, and that is why the boys fear them. But, of course, there need be no explanation for fear. Why are harmless skinks dreaded in the South?

★

I wish I.A. had something better to offer than hearsay on death from frog bite, but though I am unable to find any evidence in favour of poisonous frogs or toads in India, I think his letter interesting, because it raises a wholly different issue, in an anti-corollary sort of way. The gecko on the wall is harmless and non-poisonous—

M. Krishnan

ANSWERS READERS' NATURAL HISTORY QUERIES

I believe the Chinese eat certain kinds of geckoes. But everyone has heard, and read circumstantial newspaper reports, of families dying en masse from partaking of food with which a gecko had been cooked, accidentally.

The Secretary of the leading natural history society in this part of the world is unable to give me a radical explanation for these reports. It would appear, from the reports I have read and the accounts I have heard, that a gecko boiled with rice results in a powerfully fatal meal. One good way of verifying the truth of these reports would be to prepare and eat such a meal, but being a rabid vegetarian and a coward I am unable to verify things personally.

★

P.S., of Calcutta, has an experience to tell that is very much to the point. He says: "I am able to answer your query about geckoes boiled in rice. When I was a prisoner of war in Java in the middle of 1942, I found, one lunchtime, a par-boiled gecko at the bottom of my plate of rice. We were hungry and there was no question of throwing the rice away, although at that stage of our imprisonment we were not hungry enough to eat the gecko. The other officers thought the incident vastly amusing; I suffered no ill effects from the meal except a rather savage (but quite illogical) feeling towards the cookhouse staff."

So there we are.

Country Notebook

PLUMES IN THE WIND

I WAS surprised to find peafowl in the place. There was a tortuous "nala" here, full of a coarse, buff sand—an old river-bed along which no water flowed even in heavy rains, though it held subterranean stores and basin-like pools. Clumps of trees dotted its course, and in places bushes and the wild date formed shelving banks, but otherwise it was flush with the flat red fields around and the flat black fields beyond. Only grasses and weeds grew besides the sprouting corn—the country was so dead level and open that one could motor right across it at a fair speed. It was almost like some gigantic map rolled smoothly out, with a tree here and a clump there sticking out of its flat spread in dark green marking-pins. However, there was a breeze moving the grass tops. It was a steady, low breeze, not balmy, not gusty, but always there with a palpable pressure.

★

The fauna was typical of this open spread, capable of long speed. There were herds of Black Buck in the black-cotton soil, and a few buck in the red fields, foxes had their earths in the sand of the "nala," and many of the birds belonged to the bare, brown earth—larks, the Tawny Eagle, the doomed Great Indian Bustard, partridges where there was cover of bush and sand-grouse where there was not. I had seen peafowl in scrubland before, but never in such naked, even country.

At first I was sure they had been introduced, that by some unlikely feat of adaptation these peafowl had taken to an exposed life. But inquiry soon disproved my theory. There had been peafowl here always, not just a few along the wooded parts of the "nala" as now (where there were roosting trees and safe water), but in abundance, all over. What remained were survivors of a once plentiful tribe, too trustful of humanity. Furthermore the vague, blue, undulating ridge on the horizon marked soiled peafowl ground, broken, bush-clad hills, and though this was far away it was not so far that trekking peafowl could not get to it from terrain they disliked or feared. It made no difference to the remarkableness of finding them here whether or no some

ancestral pairs had been introduced.

Man seemed to be their chiefest enemy here. The greater cats shunned the flatness of the place—I did not even see a Jungle Cat here. Foxes do not attack such big birds, and I doubt if the mon-goose would; even stalking the sharp-eyed, absurd-looking chicks would be a job with no cover. Still, I could not help thinking that a peacock out in the open, say, a furlong from the nearest tree, ran exceptional risks in this breezy, flat country.

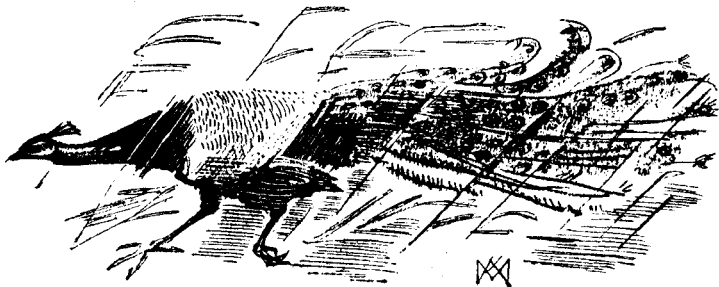
★

I chased a magnificent cock and three hens upwind, across four fields, just to see what they would do. They preferred to run in the young millet, straight towards a thick clump, and had no trouble at all in keeping well clear of me at first, in a tight bunch. Then the hens drew ahead, leaving the plume-laden cock yards behind. The wind, with no bush or hedge to break its insistent push, seemed to bother them considerably. When pressed, the cock crouched lower, depressed his bobbing, flagged head till it was almost horizontal at the stretch of his neck, and ran in a slued rush, on high-stepping, labile legs—the wind against his splendid train pushed him bodily to one side. None of the birds sought flight, and when I stopped to recover my nicotine-undermined breath, on their entering cover, the cock seemed quite as badly blown as I. Peafowl fly farther and faster than most people think, but they take time to get going in the air, and in such open country I think a determined hunter could run them down.

★

Incidentally, I was puzzled to read, in a standard book on Indian birds, that the caterwauling scream of the peacock is its alarm call. This call, with which it greets the sun each day, may occasionally be used as a warning, when the enemy is far away and clearly visible. But the typical alarm call is a harsh, grating, quickly repeated "Crank-crank-crank-crank"—a sure indication that this vigilant fowl has sighted a prowling predator.

M. KRISHNAN



M. Krishnan's

"Country



Notebook"

**COCKNEYS IN
THE COUNTRY**

WHOEVER would think that Philip Sparrow, perky, cock-sure and bumpiously dominant in the city, would lose heart in the countryside and become a mild and modest bird! It is windy space that works the change. The assertive, loud chirp is toned down by open air to a weak treble, and no longer sure of themselves in enhanced surroundings, the birds seek comfort in company. They go about in tight flocks, settling in a kit on threshing-yard and harvested field, gleaning the stubble, together. And when they fly, high and long as they rarely do in cities, they keep together still and cheep to one another as they go dipping and rising overhead—their voices in passage, refined by tall air, have a tinkling, almost musical quality.



Now, I know it is all wrong to judge birds (or beasts for that matter) by our experience and to attribute human motives to them. But I believe in the "one touch of nature" that "makes the whole world kin," and am unaware of scientific evidence against the view that animals can experience feelings and emotions known to us. Surely a bird feels fright and joy and depression as acutely as we do—their manifestations may be very different in a bird, and of course it is utterly wrong to ascribe intellectual appreciation or sentiment to it, but it feels these things all the same. I think we can understand animals emotionally at times, when reason makes no sense.



Once, on a beach near Masulipatam, I realized what loneliness could mean. I was walking along a vast expanse of flat grey sand, with a flat grey sea beyond, and there was no life anywhere around except for an occasional, scuttling crab towards which I could feel no affinity. There was a level breeze blowing, no friendly bush or mound broke the dreary, grey flatness stretching away from me as far as eye could see, and suddenly I felt puny and insignificant. My stride seemed bereft of progress and my tracks on the sand only deepened the conviction of my futile nomenity. I was a bug, crawling hopelessly on, and I was quite alone in the gathering dusk. I have often been alone but that was the only time I felt the need for company. It seems likely, to me, that birds in open country are more gregarious from a somewhat similar cause. I think that animals, in common with us, gain confidence in restricted settings.



Naturally, all diurnal creatures grow less jaunty as daylight fails and seek safe retreats, but I think the roosting of these countryside sparrows is significant of what I have been saying. They do not retire in pairs and parties to spend the night on a rafter or a lofty bough, but crowd in hundreds in a tangled bush or some low, much-branched tree, so thickly together that the foliage seems suddenly doubled in the dark. Dozens huddle in rows along twiggy boughs, each row possessed of a confluent, coonobitic unity by the bodily contact of its birds. There is no prolonged hubbub at these roosts, as there is at the roosting trees of other birds. There is a confused chirping as the sparrows come in and settle, then the chirps grow thinner and subdued till they fade altogether. By the time it is dark there is hushed silence, and the birds are huddled and immobile—but many of them are awake still.



Other birds also roost thickly in bushes, in the scrub. Mynahs, Bee-eaters, Munias, Grey and White Wagtails, all crowd into bushes or trees at sunset, often in hundreds. These same birds, in the less open habitat of cities and towns, are less massively sociable when roosting: there are exceptions, but on the whole they are definitely less sociable in urban settings. I believe it is the too open, limitless expanse of the countryside that makes all these birds pack solidly together, as night draws in. There is safety in close numbers—or a sense of safety. However, the fact remains remarkable that sparrows, the most self-assertive and cocky of cosmopolitan creatures, should be so diffident, tentative, and constantly together in the scrub.



Country Notebook**THE HUNTED
HARE**

THE warm, brown-grey ball of fur that went scudding across the carpet, with two excited children in its wake, reminded me of my schooldays. Not that an infant hare graced school or home then, but in the massive, oppressive collection of "selections from the classics" that we had to endure was a delightful account of pet leverets by Cowper—I remembered, through 25 years, the one lesson that had not been an infliction. Naturally, my recollections of it were non-detailed: I could only recall the pleasure it had given me, and something about this little captive brought Cowper back to mind.

*

This little one was barely a week old, but already it could outrun its pursuers with ease—the lack of cover and open space in the room were against it, though, and the children cornered it between the walls. Moreover, it showed little fear of humanity, being too young and inexperienced. It had to be fed its milk, but ate "karika" grass, the favourite food of hares in these parts, with relish (this wild, outspread grass has been identified for me by a Forest Officer as *Cynodon dactylon*). The prick ears were black outside and there was a patch of black on the back of the neck—it was a baby Black-naped Hare.

*

Natural history books tell us how the hare is born with its eyes open on a hostile world and can run within a short time of its



genesis, how this is a provision of kind nature to a defenceless, exposed infant. They also tell us how well a hare can run, with speed and manoeuvre, but say little about the risks it runs, all its life. I doubt if any other beast is food to so many mouths. Mongooses, jackals, wild cats, even leopards, all stalk and hunt hares in scrub and open jungles—eagles and hawk-eagles swoop down on them by day, and when it is dark, great, hush-winged owls are quite capable of kidnapping young hares.

*

Hares are not prolific breeders, but still they continue undiminished. Their sharp senses and versatile speed no doubt serve them well. It is remarkable what an instant getaway a sitting hare can make—the quick kick against the earth of the hind legs, with the length of the foot from toe to hock, gives it a flying start. When going all out the levered kicks of the hind legs propel it onward in low, long bounds, at times through spiky cover; but of course a hare can take a high jump right over a small bush if it wants to. However, speed is not the only escape that hares seek—I have often seen them escape by slow caution, too, and by staying inconspicuously put.

*

Recently I had occasion to notice this again, when two friends of mine indulged in an afternoon beat of a furlong-long belt of dense bush, along a dry water-course. I was with the beaters, and neither gun cared to shoot the few doves that rose from the shrubs that we pelted with clods and beat, literally, with long sticks. Partridge and hare were what they wanted, and both lay close and invisible in the cover. When we had reached the end of the line of bush, with only an impetuous partridge to show for our pains, one of the guns suggested a reverse beat, and we had to pelt and flog the spiky bush all over again. Nearing starting point, a hare was seen momentarily, streaking into cover, and excitement grew high.

*

There were only a dozen bushes left before the cover ended abruptly and these formed a solid limb by themselves, separated from the main body of the bushes by a yard of open space. I was posted at this point to prevent the hare breaking back, and a man was sent on ahead to guard the open space in front. Then an intense, clamorous beat of this small area, known to contain the hare, commenced. After a while I ceased being stop and became a still, silent watcher. Presently the hare came creeping back, its long ears turning around in almost circular orientation to catch the bewildering shouts from all sides, each slow, forward step taken gropingly, as if it were lame in all its legs. It did not see me, but crept on, and so tense and anxious were its looks and movements that I clean forgot my duty, and stayed frozen. After reaching the end of the cover, my friends turned back, disgusted with the inexplicable escape of the quarry. "Anything come your way?" one of them shouted, sighting me. "Not a mouse," I lied with smug truth, as I crossed over to join him, and the hare lay down in the safety of the twice-beaten bush.

M. Krishnan

Country Notebook

COBRA LORE

SOME time ago I had a discussion with two friends, both educated scientifically, on the alleged revengeful nature of the cobra. According to them the snake nurses a personal grudge against those who try to injure it, and takes the first opportunity of reprisal. They told me of instances within their own knowledge where cobras had bitten men who had, earlier, been hostile—in one case the snake was said to have picked out its victim from among a group of men on a field at night, when the man lay sleeping under a blanket with only a fateful great toe exposed.

My friends, who had originally advanced the theory that in identifying its enemy the cobra went by his voice, discarded it at once when I told them that snakes have no external ears and have poor hearing, so far as we know, though they are sensitive to ground vibrations. Very well, they said, a cobra spots its man by some trick in his gait that sets up a recognisable pattern of ground vibrations, or if that is too far-fetched, by sight. Their point was that animals with quite a low grade of intelligence can still know particular people, through senses ill understood by us, or by some overall impression we leave on them.

★

There is something in that. Dogs can distinguish between men with a certainty that is sometimes surer than ours, and are capable of long spites, and milching goats know their masters. Both these beasts are pretty high up in the order of animal intelligence, but I believe even poultry and pigeons can discriminate between familiar people and strangers. But granting that a snake would know a familiar man (this does not imply recognition in the human mode of recognition), I still think the instance of the sleeper in the field, cited by my friends with much circumstantial detail in proof of their view, clinches the argument against it. Surely no snake, however sapient, observant and vindictive can know its man in the dark by a single, naked toe!

I may be asked why I accepted the stories of my friends, based partly on hearsay. There was no need to disbelieve. On questioning them closely there seemed to be little doubt that three men, at different times and places, had been bitten by cobras which they had tried to kill earlier. I realise the superstitious bias behind such stories, but can see nothing marvellous in these. Cobras often take up residence in particular places, and have a sense of territory. Where they have been harried in their grounds, they might well resent further acts of intrusion. This theory could be developed, its limitations defined, or supported in a complementary way, but all theories are idle unless they cover known facts adequately, and can be verified. Little is known regarding the territorial feelings of cobras. King Cobras are said to resent any trespass into their grounds.

Though the vengeance of the cobra is a thing not established, there seems to be no doubt that where they have been treated

with consideration, cobras develop a very tolerant attitude to humanity. In South India there are authentic instances of a householder trusting a co-tenant cobra, instead of seeking to evict it. Such trust, always based on religious sentiment, is often absolute; it is not the cynical trust of the snake-charmer who drapes a hissing cobra carelessly round his neck—after removing its fangs. In certain temples in the south, cobras have free access to the shrine along with the barefooted devotees, and I believe no accidents have occurred so far.

A slim, insignificant-seeming two-foot cobra is a far greater menace than one six imposing feet long, as Major Wall pointed out long ago. The smaller (and younger) snake can move like a whip-lash, and is equally deadly, while the largest cobras move their heavy length at a slower pace, and are easier seen and avoided. It is significant that the resident cobras of pious households and temples are usually snakes of very large size.

Cobras can move very fast, especially when attacking. They will go away, as a rule, if offered an obvious and honourable line of retreat, but will fight if cornered or encircled. The one thing to remember, when going for a cobra with a stick, is that the snake can turn quickly in restricted settings where you cannot. A good hard whack will usually break a cobra's neck and reduce it to a writhing, ineffective turmoil of loops. A number of animals, mongooses, dogs, cats, even kittens, have been known to kill cobras and other poisonous snakes.

★

It is said that more people die of shock and fear than of actual poison in cases of cobra-bite. Being a quick snake the cobra does not bite and hang on, as some vipers do, but strikes and darts away, often not injecting a sufficient dose of poison to kill. Furthermore, the poison-sacs might be depleted by a previous bite at some other creature. Anti-venene is not readily available in many rural areas, and the tourniquet between the bite and the heart, quick lancing of the bite and immediate washing out with a dilute (not concentrated) solution of potassium permanganate all help.

When a cobra's neck is broken, or its head crushed, the rest of its body still keeps writhing about for a long time. Due to the high degree of reflex activity in a snake, where the brain is not so well developed, a measure of "decentralised administration" prevails, and so to reach the state of immobility we associate with death much killing is needed. Fire, by its overall shock, kills snakes almost instantly. I have always held that this empirical knowledge lies behind the superstition that requires every poisonous snake (especially cobras) to be cremated. But only the high-priest who officiates at these ceremonies can tell you the significance of the silver coin that is placed in or near the snake's mouth before it is taken away for cremation.

M. Krishnan

Country Notebook

GAY LITTLE FOX

SO many people mean a jackal when they say "fox"—some kind of a jackal, probably small and furry, and wouldn't it be a sort of reddish brown in parts? They know that the English Reynard does not live here (though its cousins inhabit the Himalayan foothills and sub-Himalayan plains), and that the slightly larger, quite familiar "jack" takes its place in peninsular India. They have never seen the gay little Indian Fox, but have a vague idea that there is, besides the jackal proper, a lesser edition here, which is, very likely, the fox of India.

★

Now, I have nothing against jackals and even think kindly of them at times, but to call the charming Indian Fox any kind of jackal is a slander. Our fox is a true fox, as much one as the English and Himalayan red foxes. Only, it is grey, and much smaller, no bigger than a big domestic cat. In fact, from some distance and in the uncertain light that it likes, one could take it for a well-nourished, somewhat leggy cat—but whoever saw a cat with such a fluffy tail or which was so sprightly!

The little fox lives in open places, in flat country not overgrown by forest or scrub-jungle. All day long it sleeps in its deep, cool earth in the sandy soil, secure from the heat and glare. And at dusk it comes out, and is transformed at once from an inert burrow-dweller into a frisking, puckish thing with a rich, black brush as long as its body and feet that seem to rebound from the air. Its high-pitched, quickly repeated call quivers through the darkening air, announcing its emergence. It takes a good look around, then begins the grim business of keeping its slim body and merry soul together, almost playfully.

★

It slinks along, crouches, pounces, and dances around, chasing beetles, lizards or field-mice. Watching a fox at its hunting, one is more impressed by its lightness of feet and amazing ability to turn at sharp angles at speed than by any serious purpose; but of course it hunts for its living. In a way, a fox is more dependent on its hunting skill than a jackal or wolf, for it does not smell out and feed on carrion or have the aid of pack-mates. However, it is also true that its prey includes things that call for no great effort or cunning in their hunting, beetles, crickets, the teeming swarms of gauze-winged termites issuing from the earth after rains, even melons and other fruit.



It is when a fox is escaping from an enemy that you see how nimble it is on its feet and how masterfully it can jink. No other creature can turn aside from its course, when going all out, with the spontaneity and ease of the little fox, and this manoeuvre upsets the pursuer. Up goes the quarry's big fluffy brush, as the chasing dog bounds in for the finish, and the fox has turned at right angles and gained several yards while the dog is still trying to recover from the impetus of its rush. And thanks to its small size, the fox can dart into any burrow that lies handy, and squeeze through narrow gaps. It is rarely that a fox is overtaken and caught.

★

But however safe it is on its quick feet on the ground, a fox asleep in its earth can be dug out and bagged, literally, in a gunny bag, and sometimes this sad fate overtakes it. Gipsies catch foxes in this manner, then sew up their eyelids and lips, and sell them, half-alive, to superstitious folk. Such barbarous cruelty is understandable at all times, but what makes the practice doubly revolting is the fact that the only reason for keeping the poor captive alive is that an immediate purchaser may not be found, and that dead flesh rots, however potently medicinal its repute. The little fox is not only a charming vivacious and harmless animal; it is also positively beneficial to man. One authority says: "In its consistent destruction of rats and land crabs it does real service to the farmer," and besides these it hunts a good many other small creatures that do agriculture no good. I wish it were possible to get, by some means, effective protection for this useful and delightful creature, but with wild life preservation in the state in which it is now in our country. I can only wish.

M. KRISHNAN.

Country Notebook

FISH-OWLS

NOW that winter has set in, even in the South, darkness comes early, and the day no longer turns to night with that dramatic suddenness beloved of Anglo-Indian writers of romantic fiction. From six o'clock, till seven almost, there is a clear twilight that deepens slowly into obscure night. And now is the time to look for the greater owls, for the cool grey evenings bring them out prematurely.

Our owls do not say "Tu-whit-tu-who," nor mope and complain to the moon—the lesser ones velp, chatter and shriek with demoniac gusto, and the great owls hoot in deep, resonant voices that carry far. None of them, I think, has a voice so unearthly as the Brown Fish-Owl. Soon after it emerges from its daytime retreat, its hollow boom comes floating down the dusk, startlingly sepulchral and near-sounding; later in the night, it sits bolt upright on its perch and chuckles in a muffled, snoring grunt. No doubt this bird is responsible for the evil reputations of certain countryside paths by night.

★

This is one of our biggest owls, dark and mottled, with a heavy cubist build and square, eared head. Its squat, erect silhouette hardly suggests a bird, in poor



light—once, a friend and I mistook it for a monkey slumped on a rock. The fish-owl haunts ravines and watercourses, resting by day in the secret heart of some ancient clump of trees. It is no city bird, but at night it often visits village tanks or sits on roof-tops staring percipiently into the darkness from enormous, round eyes.

The fish-owl is distinguished from the great horned-owls by its flatter "horns" and the fact that its legs are unfeathered and naked. Its feet are strikingly like the osprey's, covered with gripping scales, and meant for the same purpose, for holding slippery prey. However, it does not plunge headlong into the water after fish, but sails over the surface on hushed wings and lifts its prey out. Though it is much given to fishing, fish and crabs and such aquatic creatures do not constitute its sole food. It is known to prey on birds and small mammals, and I believe it occasionally hunts fair-sized quarry, like rock-pigeons.

I used to know a colony of Blue Rock-Pigeons that had their home in a large natural grotto in a river-rift gorge. Almost all the pigeons disappeared from here suddenly, and a fish-owl was seen about the place at the same time. I realize that this is highly inconclusive evidence, and that it might well be that the departure of the pigeons had nothing to do with the entry of the owl on the scene—perhaps others, more comprehensive in their observation, can confirm or dispel my suspicions.

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I know of another instance of a pair of Brown Fish-Owls haunting the abode of pigeons, but am almost sure that in this case the racing pigeons within were not the attraction. The owls used to come and sit on the domed roof of the loft, on a level with my bedroom window, and lying awake I have often watched them flying soundlessly about in the dew-drenched moonlight, returning periodically to the loft. I think these nocturnal fishers were drawn to the place by the small tanks around it. The way they flapped their broad wings rapidly, threshing the cold, luminous air to rise vertically without the hint of a swish, was uncanny; they also used to sail around on spread wings. Perhaps they were courting, if such sapient-looking birds can descend to such frivolity, for they indulged in much pointless flight.

It is said that the silent flight of owls helps them in locating the quarry by its sounds, besides providing a warningless swoop down to the kill. There seems to be much in this, for though they have marvellous sight by the dimmest light, hearing is an added advantage when the prey is in thin cover. Obviously, a bird flapping its wings noisily can hear little besides its own flight, and since all owls do quite a lot of hunting while coasting around, the silence of their down-lined pinions must be of real value to them. Perhaps fish-owls are more dependent on sight than others of the tribe, and that is why they have such big eyes—but it is a mistake to think that aquatic creatures are silent; fish break the surface of the stream audibly, and even crabs can be heard if there is hushed silence all round.

M. KRISHNAN

Country Notebook

MYNAHS EN MASSE



I remember an evening in Bombay, many Januarys ago, when I was shopping in a hurry in a particularly crowded bazaar. The rest of the world also seemed to be in a hurry, and as it grew darker the frantic hustle and enquiries and jostlings of the almost confluent crowd of shoppers drowned even the noise of traffic. But above it all, clear above the confused hubbub of human voices, hooting motors and grating trams, I could hear hundreds of mynahs, roosting close on roof and rafter, telling one another excitedly of the day's doings.

I had seen mynahs roosting in the heart of a city before, in Mysore and elsewhere (I do not know why it is, but they seem to have a penchant for the main bazaar), but nowhere had I heard louder evidence of their vocal superiority over the utmost that man (and woman, even) can achieve.

However, if you want to know how loud these birds can be in company, you should visit the roosting sites of mynahs in the countryside, for here they foregather in larger numbers than in urban places; and with no competing human noises, you can appreciate better the carrying power and fervour of their late evening tumult. About this time of the year mynahs roost together in the countryside, flock after flock coming in from all around to the chosen site as darkness sets in. Our birds are generally more congregational during the cold weather than at other times, from a variety of probable causes—I am speaking of resident birds, of course, and not of migrants. And of course I write of the Common Mynah, the loudest and longest of the vociferous mynah clan, when it really gets together.

★

Country Notebook
Shades from the Past

WANDERING around the cage-birds and pets section of a city market, recently, I saw an unusual offer. It was in a flat basket, the open-work lid of which had been partly covered with a cloth, and all I could see was something scaly wriggling inside. I pointed to the basket and clenched my fist in a query, and the dealer, a picturesque

by **M. KRISHNAN**

Muslim who spoke basic English, was equally concise in reply. "Gwana," he said, and flung the cloth aside, displaying the captive through the grilled lid.

But of course it was no iguana. Iguanas do not belong to our country. What lay coiled within that inadequate prison was an even nobler member of the lizard tribe, a full-grown monitor (Varanus monitor), thick-limbed and big and dark, with a skin over-wrinkled from confinement and lack of food.

Often one feels sorry for the wretched captives at such markets, but especially was I sorry for that lizard. I knew this feeling was illogical, for a monitor used to holes in earth and wood and with comparatively tough sensibilities, probably suffers less from close confinement than other creatures—in any case it would soon have been delivered from its limited life, for few people care for a monitor as a pet and its skin is valuable and flesh saleable. But it was sad to see this robust representative of past glory shut up in a flat basket.

★

In the late afternoons, when my dog was away, the monitor would visit the backyard and hunt grasshoppers among the greens, in the slanting sunshine. I am not unduly imaginative, but watching the outlandish reptile at its hunting took me back to prehistoric times more effectively than any book or museum has ever done. The thick-stemmed greens and rank grasses would become transformed, by the swarthy sinuous present, into a primeval swamp, overgrown with towering trees with green, grooved trunks and tangled reeds. Through this forest the varanousaur sauntered with a ponderous gait, stalking great, armoured hoppers with slow patience, rushing upon them when near in the manner of all lizards.

★

Even in flight from my dog (which could never summon the courage to close in on the monstrous intruder) that monitor had a certain old-world dignity that was impressive. Monitors can move at considerable speed in a flurried, splay-legged run, but when caught in the open, with no cover handy into which it could dive, the lizard would walk away from the dog, retreat-

ing towards the compound wall with many hostile glances thrown over its shoulder, and then it would be over the wall in a dark streak before the enemy could sense flight and attack.

However, I have been repeatedly assured, by gipsies who catch this lizard, that in spite of its undoubted muscular power and inimical looks the monitor is a poor fighter. It has powerful jaws, armed with hard teeth, and can kill rats and snakes, and its heavy limbs end in long, hooked nails that can rip nastily. With these claws it can secure a hold on a rock or uneven wall that the pull of a man cannot shift, and it is said that the Maharrattas used the monitor in warfare, climbing the steep forts of the enemy after the lizard with the aid of a light rope, tied to its loins. But I am told that, when it is attacked, the monitor's first thought is to seek cover, and that it often escapes by the

*

The roosting site is often near a piece of water, and while there seems to be no preference for particular trees, I have known a clump of acacias (babool) to be favoured. The roosting trees are usually and fortunately some distance from human habitations, but it requires no great effort or cunning to locate them. All that you have to do is to go out into

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(Continued from Next Col.)
the evening and listen. Presently a distant but audible clamour breaks in on you, which gains in volume and clarity as you walk straight towards it.

At no time is the Common Mynah soft-voiced, not even when it is decorously parading your lawn, reducing the grasshopper population. The voice of this bird is naturally robust, and harsh, and it loves to hear itself. But a mynah by itself, or with a mate, hunting prey, is a comparatively silent creature. When the day is done and there is no longer the preoccupation of the chase, when the oncoming night limits conversation to a few brief, insufficient minutes, it is then that the mynah feels the urge to tell its fellows all the news, and to be first with the gossip. Like all good talkers it finds company stimulating. The din at its rural roosts is indescribable.

However, what impresses me at these communal roosts is not the vocal ugliness of these birds, but the thought of the solid good that they must be doing us. They live mainly on insects and worms, and by a not unnatural association of voice with mouth, I have always been reminded, as I retreated from the clamour of the roost and the voices of the mynahs grew less and less discordant, of the untold numbers of harmful insects that go down these mouths each day.

M. KRISHNAN

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All lizards, of course, are representative of this past, when the reptiles dominated life. But our lizards are insignificant little things, all but the monitor which has the size and looks to remind one of that remote age. In its youth it is unimpressive, slim and light-coloured and banded, but it improves with age. A grown monitor is a formidable looking creature, nearly four feet long, with a long, thick, laterally compressed tail and a broad, thick body slung between massive limbs. Its neck is long and muscular, like the neck of extinct reptiles, and the smooth, close-scaled skin forms wrinkles on the throat and sides. Its colour changes to a deep, rocky grey, once it outgrows its banded youth, and the bifid tongue, darting in and out of its straight jaws, is almost black. An adult monitor has the heaviness of build and swarthy, cold, antipathetic looks that are needed to stimulate the imagination.

I remember well a big monitor that took up residence with me for a week, some years ago. I was living then in a ramshackle cottage in a large, oval compound, with a number of sheds on its perimeter. Only a few camel's thorn shrubs and a rocky mound, studded with aloes and cacti, graced the barren grounds and in the backyard there was a patch of neglected greens struggling for existence with coarse grasses. The dragon made its appearance one evening in the woodshed, and apparently it approved of the place, for it stayed on for a week in spite of the frequent chivvying of my dog.



speed of its rush. When it is cornered, it is said to lash out with its muscular tail, and since this can be quite painful, the gipsies say they wait till they can get a firm hold on the offensive tail, when the rest of the lizard becomes quite helpless. There must be much truth in these reports, for I have seen these men handle a large, captive monitor in

this manner, but I know that when fighting among themselves these lizards bite, and I cannot understand why they should be jawless against other adversaries.

I suppose it is the consequence of their ancient lineage; aristocrats are prone to give in when overpowered, with resigned dignity, where upstarts would still squabble.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

...Strange Meat...

OVERHANGING the four-foot-high wall that divides my neighbour's territory from mine on the east are two clumps of Thevetia trees, one on either side. Elsewhere, in my modest backyard and in the grounds of other neighbours, are other Thevetias—apparently the tree takes kindly to the hard, clayed soil of the locality. All the year round, with minor rests, the Thevetias bear abundant golden bloom and squat, green drupes; and from ever since I can remember the children of the house have been warned sternly against the accessible fruit, untempting in their greenness but fleshy enough to rouse the curiosity of experimental youth. For though this hardy tree needs little care and decorates poor soil with its close boughs, thick with vivid green, narrow leaves and showy, yellow flowers, it is poisonous.

Every part of the little tree is poisonous, the roots, the stem and foliage, the fruit. I find the following information on its venom in a textbook of medical jurisprudence (of recent date) under the head "Cerbera Thevetia or Thevetia nerifolia", with the aliases "Exile or Yellow Oleander, Pila Kaner": "The plant is highly poisonous and contains an active principle, Thevetin, which is a glucoside. It resides in the milky juice which exudes from all parts of the plant."

The book goes on to say that the roots, seeds and pericarp are used for a variety of lethal purposes, and that the action of the "active principle" is very similar to digitalin, but has a convulsant effect as well. Children have

died from eating the flowers, and the fruit is used for poisoning cattle—the powdered bark is a febrifuge in extremely small doses, but harmful when taken carelessly. I may add, from personal experience, that the latex of this tree has a smarting, not too unpleasant, taste.

But apparently what is poison for one can be meat for another, at least when the other is a bird. For many years I have noticed that Koels, which are plentiful here, have a decided partiality

by **M. KRISHNAN**

for the Thevetias in my compound. At first I put this down to the effective cover that these trees afford to a bird of retiring disposition. Koels dislike the vulgar, crow-infested open; they skulk and hide in leafy obscurity, secure from the attentions of the would-be caretakers of their progeny—the much-branched Thevetia, bristling with leaves, provides a safe retreat. Later on, however, I noticed that the Koels were pecking energetically at something in these trees. I could not make out just what they were doing, for the trees were younger and less thickly clad, then, and a near approach, however craftily made, scared the birds away.

But I found strong circumstantial evidence: I found freshly broken twigs and drupes, from which the latex was still exuding, in the cover they had just quit. I had seen Koels eating the luscious, blood-red fruits of the *Cephalandra indica* with quick, violent pecks, tearing the creeper in their hurry, but I could not understand why they should peck at the poisonous fruit of the Thevetia or break its green twigs, with no nests to build even. Only last month did I discover the truth.

Late last December, and again early this year, I watched Koels eating the fruit of the Thevetia from close range. Crouched in the shade of the compound wall and with my head screened by foliage, I was able to observe the birds at their repast from just two yards away. On the first occasion a big, mottled hen Koel was in the tree, slinking and sidling along the branches with frequent glances all around, in the furtive manner of its tribe. For a moment its ruby eyes met mine squarely, but perceived nothing, and soon the bird was busy with a drupe. It dug into the fruit with sharp jabs of its bill, and tore out a piece of mesocarp, dripping latex, which it swallowed with an upward toss of its head.

The second mouthful, torn out with a hard, sideways jerk of the head, detached the rest of the fruit from its stalk, and it fell unheeded to the earth. During the two or three minutes that I watched this bird it took half-a-dozen mouthfuls of the fruit and felled three fruits, breaking a slender green twig as well in its avid haste. Then it flew away quite suddenly, alarmed by something that escaped me, probably by me in spite of my rigorous immobility. I inspected the fallen fruit. The jabbing bill had reached right down to the kernel, and dug out the pieces of fleshy mesocarp in a few strokes.

The second time it was a slim, glossy-black cock, and it behaved in an identical manner, except that it flew away sooner and after eating only two mouthfuls of the fruit. I have not seen any other bird or beast eating the drupes of the Thevetia, nor have I heard of it. The pericarp is definitely harmful to men and cattle. How is it, then, that the Koel consumes it so zestfully? Frankly, I do not know the answer to this question, but it seems reasonable to suppose that they have some special immunity from the action of Thevetia.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

Mixed Diet

DURING the past month I have again observed koels eating the poisonous fruit of the Thevetia, quite half-a-dozen times. I can add little to my earlier report on this strange addiction (Country Notebook for February 3), but they seem to choose ripe fruit invariably, fruit that get detached from their stalks easily, after two or three pecks. Ripening is a process that involves chemical changes, and it is possible that this alters the proportion of the poison, Thevetin, in the pulp; but this cannot quite explain koels consuming these drupes with avid desire, and no subsequent regrets.

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I have not seen any other bird or beast evincing the slightest interest in the fruit of the Thevetia during this month, when I watched the trees more narrowly than usual, but an observer (whose interest was stimulated by my record of koels eating the drupes) tells me that he saw a

by M. KRISHNAN

Common Mynah pecking at one of these fruit on the ground. The fruit was brought to me, and showed beak-gouged holes, but since koel-pecked fruit fall to the ground with similar marks, this was not conclusive proof. However, the observer tells me that he saw his mynah peck at the drupe several times, and eat pieces from it. I intend no sort of scepticism, but would like verification of this instance: perhaps some reader can provide it.

The squirrel's diet is a topic that goes back to my childhood. There was a smug squirrel, sitting up with a fruit in its forepaws, in the primer from which I learned my Tamil; it stood for the first letter of the alphabet, and





(Continued from next Col.)

white-ants are a menace where I live. That evening I saw two squirrels feeding off the new-formed store. They broke the crust of earth with repeated shoves of their noses, and licked up the termites as they tumbled out of their roofless homes. There was a methodical lack of haste, almost a rhythm, in the termite-eating of those squirrels—they demolished a few square inches of the crust, then stopped to feed, then extended the breach. But after a while they seemed to tire of this slow repast, and scampered away. I saw them next day at the termite-crust, and again a few days later. In a week they had almost demolished the entire patch, but there were tunnels and thick areas beyond their noses, and I left nothing to chance. One cannot afford to, where I live.



Incidentally, I heard squirrels calling at noon—a long, sustained “cheep-cheep-cheep”—to one another in the first week of March, and also heard the monotonous, ceaseless “tonk” of the copper-smith that day. Summer has officially arrived in these parts, somewhat prematurely, as it has in many other places.

was wretchedly drawn. From this book, and its successors, I learned that the squirrel (I mean the common, striped squirrel that enters our homes and lives so freely) is a harmless, lovable vegetarian that lives on fruits and nuts. Nurtured on this sort of natural history, I received a rude shock when I discovered (in my boyhood) that squirrels would eat eggs with relish. I need not have felt so perturbed over this unnatural lapse from vegetarianism: there is a large section of humanity that considers eggs vegetable.



Years later, while trying to grow maize in my backyard, I found out the truth about these squirrels. They have a fiendish passion for sprouting corn, and will dig up and savage several rows in no time. Enthusiastic horticulturists can provide a list of rare buds and growing tips especially fancied by these vandals.

However, recently I noticed a redeeming feature in the diet of these rodents. Some weeks ago a long patch of earth made its appearance on the brickwork of my verandah wall. I resolved at once to demolish it next day, for

(Continued in previous Col.)

..... COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

Freebooters Of The Air

by M. KRISHNAN

WATCHING India's first historic Test victory over England, along with a huge holiday crowd, were a dozen kites. They had followed the game with unrelaxing eyes over the previous three days, and I knew some of them by the close of the opening day.

One had two forward primaries missing from each wing, one had a squarish tail, a kite was exceptionally light in colour, a bleached golden brown, another was almost black in its swarthy new plumage, and there was a bird that had lost the entire tail quite recently. I was amused by the vigilance of these birds, patrolling the sky above the ground. Whenever drinks were brought out to the players, the air over-

ously at his neighbour's loss, only to have his own bread snatched the next moment—the sheepish smile on his face was worth going a long way to see.

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Looting kites are quite a feature of our Bazaars and city markets and I know a restaurant in a park, in the heart of a big city, where these birds have grown so audaciously slick that habitués prefer the dull tile-roofed verandah to the charm of repast in the open with colourful shrubs around and grass underfoot. These freebooters of the air come a close second after crows in the list of urban fauna, but there are kites in the country too.

There, with no meat stalls and crowded eating-houses, kites work harder for their living, and are

stabbing beaks or long, wading legs, other specialized features or at least the boldness to plunge headlong into the water. Elsewhere, I have seen kites chasing maimed quarry or flapping heavily among swarming termites, which they seized ponderously in their grappling-hook feet.

★

Once I saw a crowd of kites on the ground, in a forest glade. They had feasted with the vultures and were preening themselves after the glut, before roosting. And once I saw a kite hopping along the grass gawkily in the wake of grazing cattle. Hunger had driven that bird into a fresh inroad on the path of degradation, but apparently a kite on terra firma can only lose its balance when it tries to clutch with one foot at ebullient grasshoppers.

That is just as well, for these birds have sunk sufficiently low. They are so common that we do not notice them, and when we do the occasion is often too annoying for us to appreciate their air mastery. Swifts and falcons are faster and more dashing, vultures more effortless in their soaring, but for sheer manoeuvre on spread wings the kite is unbeatable. No other bird has its slick skill in theft—its noiseless descent on the unsuspecting victim and grab with a comprehensive foot. The kite has a strong hooked beak, and a powerful build—it is surprising that it has not developed, beyond petty theft, to thuggery and murder, with its equipment.

But perhaps that, too, is just as well. Those who raise poultry have no love for this bird as it is, and if it took to a more adventurous and violent way of life, the hand of everyone must be against it, in city and in village. And that would be no small waste of national energy, considering the kite population of our country!

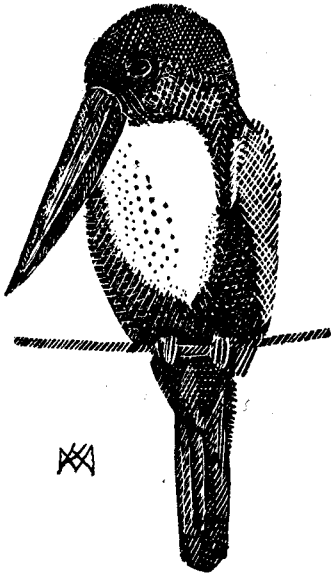


head was suddenly thick with kites, swooping and circling low for a minute before sailing away disappointed. During the breaks for lunch and tea there were opportunist scrambles, some birds alighting on the grass to consume scraps thrown aside by the crowd, others flying away with the booty. Quite a few of the spectators, discussing the happenings and prospects excitedly, had the hurried morsel expertly plucked from their hands. Especially was I amused by a sandwich-eater who laughed uproari-

far less offensively familiar. They take to scavenging for their food, a more strenuous and less fashionable profession than picking pockets in cities. And in the remote countryside I have known kites actually hunt their prey.

I know a lake in such a place where I have seen kites fishing. They sail low over the water and clutch at the slippery prey on the surface with their talons, often without success. Here they are awkward apprentices in comparison to the many expert fishermen around, birds equipped with long,

Country Notebook



THERE are three wells around my compound, just outside, in the territories of neighbours. The brackish water deep down in them is not potable, but my neighbours use it for their kitchen-gardens. They have dug irrigation channels from the wells to the plots of vegetables, with steep earth banks and miniature dams to regulate the flow of the precious fluid. Frogs, tadpoles, water-boatmen, mole-crickets, and a variety of worms, grubs and flying insects inhabit this region, and recently a White-breasted Kingfisher has taken up residence in my backyard from where it can command a comprehensive view of the aqueducts.

It has many perches here, and shifts from one to another, but its favourite seat is at one end of

by **M. KRISHNAN**

a clothes-line, in the shade of foliage. It sits inert and slumped and seems wholly lost in moody introspection—but in fact it is watching for signs of lesser life in the inundated field of its vision. Other birds that sit up for their prey adopt a similar attitude in vigil, rollers, bee-eaters, buzzards. The concealing value of such repose is obvious even to colour-sensitive human eyes. I have to look about me to locate this kingfisher in spite of the dazzling contrasts of maroon and blue and white in its plumage. Vivacity, even a perky stance, undoubtedly catches the eye; our dusky robins prove the truth of this.

This kingfisher has little fear of men, or else it is so absorbed in its watch for small fry that it

(Continued on page 12.)

Country Notebook

(Continued from page 11)

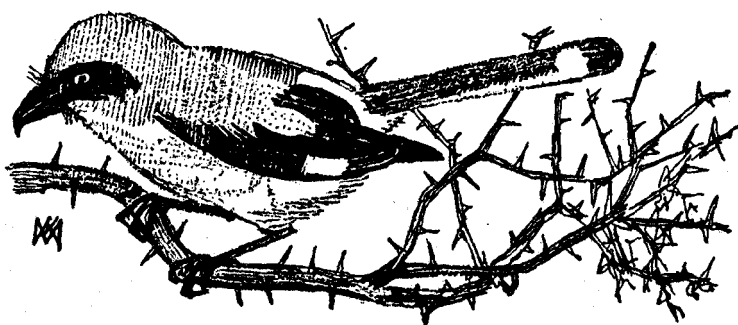
does not notice my ponderous approach. If I do not make straight for it but observe a certain circumspection and silence, I can get to within three yards of its perch without alarming it (incidentally, what matters is a slow approach without jerky movement rather than silence—the bird seems indifferent to my whistling). It is then that I see how brilliantly it is coloured, and that it is wide awake for all its slouched stillness.

I venture too near and it is away in a vivid streak, with a harsh cackle. The great sword bill, sheathed in immobility and shade when the bird is sitting, flashes redly ahead in flight, followed by the blue and white of wing and tail. It flies straight to the well beyond the compound wall, then dips sharply and alights on the well-post, and is once more lost in dejected reverie.

The Government, trying to induce the rice-eating peoples of the riceless South to sample other grain, could well adopt this bird for its emblem, for it has renounced the limited diet of its tribe and taken to more varied and cosmopolitan fare. Its build is the build of a kingfisher, and its great bill is the authentic implement of a fishhunter, but hundreds of generations ago it grew independent of pool and stream and finned prey, and often it lives far from water. It feeds on any small thing that it can seize in its big bill and batter to death—lizards, insects, grubs and worms, tadpoles, even fish on occasion. In summer it haunts the vicinity of wells, not for the sake of the fish in them, but for the creeping and crawling life that the moist earth attracts. During the monsoons, when the water stagnates in roadside ditches and dips, I have often seen this bird fishing for tadpoles and minnows in the puddles—but the monsoons have not often been with us lately. The five successive years of drought that have afflicted this area must have fixed the tendency to hunt land-living prey even more firmly in the White-breasted Kingfishers here. This is the only Indian kingfisher that has developed this terrestrial bias, but in Australia there are kingfishers that have forsaken the water even more completely.

There is one peculiarity about this kingfisher that I have noticed, and that I am quite unable to explain. Sometimes it flies into limited settings, into a room or verandah or shed, and then it seems quite helpless and flutters weakly about, suffering itself to be caught where other birds would have escaped with ease. So weak is it on the wing then, so torpid and slow, that it seems acutely ill, or else quite dazed. I have caught White-breasted Kingfishers in this way thrice or four times, and I have known others catch the bird in similar circumstances. It lies unprotesting in the hand, and the amazing lightness of the bird (birds are much lighter than we think) lends further probability to the feeling that it is very ill—but toss it clear into the air, and it flies briskly away, to resume its hunting. This kingfisher nests in long, narrow tunnels in the earth, and one would think that it is used to restricted spaces. Perhaps it is sudden fright, at being cornered by men, that is responsible for its lassitude on such occasions.

... Grey Shrike ...



I have just returned from a drought-stricken suburb, where only the tangled grey of spiky shrubs relieved the flat, baked brown of the landscape. The trees were few and far between, the grass was withered, and such life as there was clustered, open-mouthed, around a few deep wells. Even the crows and goats seemed reluctant to leave the delightful shade of the village neem trees, which were in flower, but walking across the desiccated open I found a drier life in possession. Brown grasshoppers rose from the brown, sparse grass underfoot, there were finch-larks in the fields, blood-suckers ran splay-legged to the cover of fences at my approach and, at long intervals, big Grey

By

M. KRISHNAN

Shrikes sat austere-ly on the bush tops, very much at home in that desolate setting.

A pair were together, from which I concluded that these stern birds had weakened already under a seasonal urge. The Grey Shrike loves its own company, and keeps relentless vigil over its territory, allowing no kith or kin to violate its privacy. But when summer comes spring is not far behind, and for a while it relaxes its strictness and suffers a mate. It sings a sweet, tinkling song then that no one would expect from its looks and habitual, harsh laconism; but even then it is not given to flutterings and fluffy displays; it comports itself with a dignity and restraint exceptional in the love-silly world of birds.

★

I have always thought this shrike one of the most aloofly distinguished of our birds. There is the hint of silver in the grey of its plumage, and the big, square head, the top-heavy build, the heavy, hooked bill and broad, black eye-stripe all convey not only the suggestion of formidableness but of severe dignity as well, a suggestion that its love of thorn-scarred wastes and its unsociable habits confirm. Other shrikes that live in somewhat similar places have similar natures, but somehow the tribe has earned for itself an undeserved reputation for blood lust.

These are the "butcher birds", a tribe repugnant to the sentiment of Western writers of popular natural history. Quite recently I read an American description of a typical shrike, where the bird was damned with all the lurid exaggeration that the writer could command, as a kill-crazy, callous, bloodthirsty murderer that lurked in bushes and throttled innocent little birds. I have never been able to understand the importing of human concepts of virtue and morality into a study of natural history, in all seriousness, but even granting that this is good form I cannot see how shrikes are any the more bloodthirsty

than other birds that watch for their prey from a perch and pounce down on them.

Such birds usually hunt insects or other small creatures, but occasionally they tackle more substantial prey, weak enough to be overpowered but not sufficiently small to be swallowed in a mouthful or killed at once—nestlings large insects with tough shells, or lizards. Birds better equipped for rapine, sparrow-hawks for instance, can kill sizeable prey quickly, but shrikes have to use much force to still the struggles of their occasional large victims, and there is no question of cruelty or blood lust involved. In fact, far from killing madly in excess of their needs, shrikes have developed the prudent habit of impaling surplus catch on thorns, against a rainy day, and it is from this peculiarity and not from their murderous violence that the name "butcher birds" has come to them.

Incidentally, I have never seen the Grey Shrike's larder in the warm plains, though I saw a lizard neatly impaled by one of these birds in a hill station. The number of things I have not seen are very many, and proves nothing, but is it possible that in the hotter plains, where putrefaction is rapid, shrikes are not much given to stocking larders?

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GREY NECKS... by M. KRISHNAN

CROWS are sitting in pairs on treetops, late in the evenings. They choose a foliage-free bough, high up, and for an hour before dark they sit close, indulging in caresses with their bills and saying low, sweet nothings to each other (of course crows have a language—Seton claimed to know a bit of it!). I have seen dozens of these courting couples in the past week, and there is no doubt that the local grey necks have exchanged a communal life for a connubial one. Shortly they will nest, and rear their young, and the young of the Koel, with loving care—incidentally, I have yet to hear Koels here (where they are plentiful) in spite of the premature onset of summer; apparently their love follows the love-life of the crows.

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The grey-necked House-crow is the commonest bird of town and countryside, and so varied in habit and intelligence that it is always interesting to watch. More than one observer of Indian bird life has devoted an entire book to it, and still how little we know about it! Does it pair for life? Nothing definite seems to be known on this point. The one sure way of finding this out would be to ring a number of crows with distinctively coloured rings, and watch them over years—strong metal rings would be needed, as these birds have powerful and clever beaks and will peck at and remove rings made of celluloid or similar material. Both birds of a pair must be distinctively marked—I used to know a white-flecked crow and watched it nest in successive years, but could never be sure if its mate was the same each year. Grey necks live in a flock in the off season, when not nesting, and roost in company. It may be thought that this sociable winter habit would be conducive to promiscuity in pairing when the breeding season comes again, but this need not be so—there are

monogamous birds with a gregarious habit.

One thing I am fairly sure of, after watching House-crows and Jungle-crows for years, is that the former are far cleverer on the wing. They are less clumsy in build and movement, though less powerful, and on the whole I think they are more intelligent than their jungly cousins. It is in flight, however, that their superior skill is obvious. When the termites swarm and both kinds of crows are feasting, the grey neck's comparative air mastery is clear.

A House-crow will shoot up



from its perch, chase a fluttering insect on quick flapping wings, and take it surely—it is more given to hunting winged prey in this manner than most people think, especially in the fading evening light. Moreover, some grey necks are noticeably more expert in this art than others. Recently I had occasion to verify the truth of this

I was sitting at a table in an open-air café on a beach one evening, and was offered a plate of "chaklis"—which I thought unfit for human consumption after sampling. After my usual thrifty habit, I looked around for non-human habitués to whom I could donate the burnt, twiggy, garlic-spiced dish. There was a thin dog with soulful eyes watching me, and further away there was a pair of casual grey necks, ap-

parently more interested in a tête-a-tête and the seascape than in me. I turned my back on the dog, for I find yearning canine eyes beyond my will power, and tossed a bit of the "chakli" into the stiff cross-wind. The crows jumped into the breeze and one of them caught the morsel deftly in its beak—they never take things in the air in their feet—and swallowed it in mid-air. I tossed another bit high, and, as if by magic, five crows shot up after it.

Presently there were well over a dozen grey necks. I kept on tossing the twiggy inducements into the breeze, and when the plate was empty I ordered another. I learned much from this brief spell of flighted offerings to the crows. In spite of their packed numbers, they never collided in the air, and only once was one of several fragments thrown up together allowed to land. One crow—I am certain of it as I never took my eyes off this bird—was far cleverer at the game than the rest—its interception of the parabolic trajectory of the morsels was sure and easy. It did not swallow its first catch, but went for the next bit as well without dropping the first one, repeating this astounding performance till it had four bits crosswise in its beak. Then it was forced to retreat for a brief spell of swallowing.

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All the crows there were grey necks—Jungle-crows don't care much for the strong cross-wind on the beach. I would much have liked to prolong this tossing experiment, but when the second plate of burnt offerings was finished I noticed that everyone in the café, including the waiters, were staring at me in undisguised amusement, and this forced me to call for my bill and leave in a hurry. Perhaps, some other day when I can summon a less self-conscious mood, I may complete the experiment.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

The Sea-king's Eyrie

HIGH up in a towering casuarina, a hundred feet above the ground, the sea-eagles had built their ponderous nest. It was wedged firmly into the trifid, ultimate fork of the trunk, a firmly-knit stack of thick twigs and dry branches, looking more like a pile of faggots than anything else. It was hollow on top, though I could not see the depression from the third-storey terrace of the building from which I watched, for the eyrie was well above the level of the housetop, but the way the big nestling disappeared from view every time it waddled to the centre from the rim of the nest showed a hollow.

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The sea was not a mile away, perhaps not even two furlongs by air. One of the parent birds mounted guard on the treetop, a few yards from the nest, while the other sailed away on a foraging expedition. These were



took care to do my watching from the shelter of a pillar or the parapet, not too obviously.

Off and on, for a fortnight, I watched these sea-eagles, and learned not very much about them. One of the adults was slightly the larger; I thought this was the she-eagle. This one it was that stayed near the nest, watching, most of the time. Much of the scouting for food, for the entire family, fell to the lot of the other eagle. Sizeable fish seemed to form the staple diet, though once the forager re-

in hackles. The body was a dark, mottled brown—the colour one associates with raptorial birds. This fledgeling progressed rapidly during the fortnight, and when I saw it last (on May 1), it was standing on the edge of the nest-platform and flapping its wings gawkily, though it had not yet essayed flight.

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The food-laden return of the parent bird was the signal for crows to gather around the nest, or fly over it. Not once did I see them profit by this watchfulness: they never dared to get on to the nest, to try to snatch a morsel, though they would sit all around, close by in the tree. At times one or the other of the adult sea-eagles would leave the nesting tree and sit in a neighbouring one (also a casuarina), and when this happened the crows mobbed it immediately. Apparently, away from the location of the nest, they were not afraid of it. Frequently they forced the big bird to take wing and fly away from their attentions, with a harsh, metallic, reiterated call, but once I saw the eagle dive at two crows that were annoying it and send them scattering for dear life.

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I was told, by the gardener of the house, that these sea-eagles had nested here for years, that every year they reared their progeny on this same nest, that he did not know what happened to the youngsters when they grew up but that the old birds remained there right through the year. The nest looked as if the accretion of many years had been added on to a structure that was originally no small thing. We estimated that it was a rounded cube, about four feet each way. Even allowing for interspaces and the hollowness of its top, it must have contained over a hundred sizeable pieces of wood, and have weighed about 200 lbs. How did these seafaring birds acquire the large, dry branches that formed the cross-beams of the eyrie? Did they pick them off the backwaters, or did they wrench them clear from greenwood, as Jungle Crows do? I cannot answer these questions, or find someone who can, but it seems reasonable to suppose that much of the nesting material was, originally, flotsam.

by M. KRISHNAN

White-bellied Sea-Eagles, almost as big as a vulture and much more shapely in build, with slaty-brown backs, the head, neck and under-parts white, sail-like wings broadly edged with black, and a short, fan tail. The adults looked strangely like overgrown gulls, the grey and white in the plumage and length of wing suggesting a gull, but they sat in the manner of eagles, upright on the treetop, talons gripping the bough firmly. The wings projected beyond the brief tail in repose, their tips crossing.

Through my binoculars, the bird was startlingly near and clear; I could see the grey, hooked beak, the powerful talons, even the dark, apprehensive eyes. It was watching me intently, with obvious distrust. Thereafter I

turned with a long, dangling prey that looked like a sea-snake—but probably it was only an eel. The grown birds fed by turns, after parting with a large piece to the offspring. There was a patrician lack of haste about the feeding and flight of these eagles that was impressive: who would believe that it is these same birds that flog the air above the sea with untiring wings and chase each other in giddy flight, clamouring raucously all the time, earlier in the year!

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The youngster was about three-quarters the size of its parents, and much more cognizably eagle. The feathers on its head and neck were not white and sleek as in the grown birds, but streaky, pale brown, and they stood out

Country Notebook

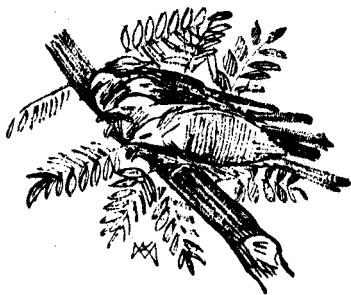
SLEEPING BIRDS

THE cyclone that visited the southern coastline recently announced itself with a sudden storm past midnight. Continuous downpours followed, and fitful gales at intervals, but it was the initial storm that caused the most damage.

The morning after, I went around in the thick grey rain, looking for signs of how the lesser life had fared. There was nothing on the roads except the litter of wrecked trees: whatever had been drowned had been removed by the turbulent drains. But nearer home I found strange sights. Two crows were roosting on a bracket beneath my neighbour's terrace eaves, fast asleep at 9 a.m.! Their slumped, almost confluent bodies and bedraggled plumage suggested a rough time in the stormy night; perhaps they were a nesting pair that had found refuge from the elements at last on that bracket. And on a *Gliricidia* bough in the shelter of my own roof I saw something I had never seen before, five White-headed Babblers huddled in a row, like birds in a Japanese woodcut, sleeping in exhaustion. That morning I observed more birds sleeping than I had ever before, some of them so heavily that I could have reached out and grabbed them had I wished to.

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Birds and beasts, of course, need sleep just as we do—like love and hunger this is one of those deep needs "that makes the whole world kin." But their sleeping habits may be very different from ours, governed by different periodicities and conditions. Roosting birds like company—it is thought they find a measure of safety in close numbers; many animals sleep on a full stomach, ignoring the maxim "After supper walk a



mile," and almost all have widely different views from us on bedroom ventilation. What interests me is not their diverse habits of sleep so much as the question, does sleep come to them with sensations similar to the ones we feel? Any answer to this must be highly speculative, but even to indulge in such speculation we need to know quite a lot about how animals drowse and how we do—and how little we seem to know about our own repose!

Sleep can be an intensely beautiful experience. Others may think me naive, but it is the most complete bliss I have known in life, more rapturous than love, more deeply satisfying and exquisite than the slaking of a long thirst or childhood discovery of Turkish-delight. It is the only sensual joy to which a man can abandon himself utterly, without self-conscious effort or any vague qualms of guilt or gluttony. And still there are people who do not realize the joy of sleep—perhaps because they woo it with pills and potions or take it too much for granted. Searching through anthologies for some passage that will express what I wish to say, I can find nothing adequate in English literature! Wordsworth's sonnet is insomniac, Coleridge too insistent on comprehensive simplicity, and even Shakespeare's celebrated lines seem too pat and encomiastic. It is with scientific unawareness of the bathos of my attempt that I tell you of sweet sleep.

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It is not of the healing void of slumber that I write, but of its analgesic, sharp brink. On this thin rim, at times, the senses are clarified remarkably—the normal perceptions are inspissated, and a volatile consciousness that is objective and all-absorbing covers their thick residue. It is then that sleep is wonderful. One is no longer aware of tired, aching limbs, and sounds and smells that are utterly lost on one when alert and visual come through with delightful ease. I think one must be dog-tired, physically, to attain this state, but perhaps I say this from an idiosyncrasy.

The commonest sounds are refined, soothing and clear just before sleep drowns them—the cawing of crows (everyone who has had a siesta in India will know just what I mean), the far-off bark of a village dog, the creaking of bullock carts. I do not mean just this, but the increased acuteness of perceptions that supervenes, at times, just before sleep, when the faintest of smells and sounds is clear and identifiable, and there is a certain selection of them from out of the much louder normal noises of the environment, which are not heard at all. I do not know if you have had the experience, or if I seem just wildly incomprehensible. I can only say that there is such a superfineness of sensibilities, in sleep, that is occasional and therefore unreliable in men. Some-

by

M. KRISHNAN

times this seems to subsist through sleep: I have jumped up wide-awake from sound, fatigued slumber, hearing some slight but unusual noise.

I do not know what senses are acute in a sleeping bird, but in most mammals the ears seem receptive, half-awake, in sleep. I can say nothing positive on this issue, but a series of experiments I made with sleeping dogs suggested that dogs are less quickly awakened by smells and sudden changes of lighting than by sounds, and earthquakes sensed through the body. The only other creatures whose tired-out sleep I have studied are pigeons, and they too seemed sensitive to sounds. Perhaps some one of my readers, who is a wild-fowler and has tried to steal up to duck asleep, can tell me what it is that invariably wakens them in time.

The Fastest Thing On Legs

by
M. KRISHNAN

I REMEMBER watching a display by India's first jet-propelled aircraft, along with a milling crowd. There was a little boy by my side who was most informative—he told us the difference in flight and motive power between these planes and the ordinary ones with propellers, pointed out peculiarities in design, and explained the relative speeds of light and sound to a dear old lady. Thanks to this young scholar we all knew at what speed the jet-fighters tore through the heavens, looped loops, and zoomed high again, and I joined in the general expression of wonder and applause.

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But now, well away from that little boy and that arithmetically-minded crowd to whom 600 m.p.h. meant so much, I don't mind confessing that I was not thrilled specially. Yes, it was fun watching those planes perform their evolutions, and no doubt they were faster than the ones I had seen before, but they conveyed no sense of magnificent achievement of space to me. For one thing, their speed, as they went far above, was an abstract thing that needed thought, even sophistry, for its appreciation; and even when they came near and were patently dynamic—well, they were engines, just big, loud engines, and their power and speed was mechanical, chemical, inhuman.

It is the living, muscular speed of animals that impresses me, even a squirrel making a dash for safety. That is a speed I can appreciate, a quickness I can envy and marvel at. If you like speed, and want to see something sustained in its effortless, rhythmic impetuosity, you should watch a herd of black buck going all out for a few miles—there is tangible, real speed, for you.

Black buck are the fastest things on legs in India, and perhaps anywhere in the world. As Dunbar Brander points out, the now extinct hunting leopard even cannot match the buck for speed, for though swifter from a standing start and for the first few furlongs, the hunting leopard is purely a sprinter and soon gets spent.



Black buck can keep up their pace for 10 miles or more and when going flat out can attain 60 mph—a superb speed, not reached by any motor vehicle so far over the ground which they inhabit. The muscles of a buck are like cata-

why do they have this habit of running in a curve? That is a habit also shared by certain other animals, and a circuitous explanation occurs to me—but let's not have it.

Black buck are unquestionably among the most beautiful of the world's beasts, and are exclusively Indian. Once they lived in vast herds all over the country, but are fewer and more local now. In certain places, in South India for example, they are dwindling steadily and must soon be extinct unless immediate help is afforded. It is true that the slaughter of buck by "sportsmen", irrespective of sex, numbers, or laws, is largely responsible for this dwindling, but there is a more pernicious though less immediate cause. Black buck live in open country, always, and such terrain is most easily cultivable and, so, most cultivated. Buck do not take to desert conditions: they must have green fodder. A substantial part of their diet consists of grasses and plants like the wild bitter gourd (whose fruits they love), but living in the midst of crops (their original homes having been brought so largely under the plough), they often help themselves to food crops. This, while providing a ready excuse for shooting the crop-raiders, leaves them with nowhere to go. The animals of the open will, I think, be the last to receive any recognition from those interested in the saving of our wonderful, vanishing wild life, one of our richest national assets.

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The fauna of flat country require plenty of living space, adequate grazing, and a certain remoteness from cultivation if they are not to be tempted. These conditions are unlikely of realization in India today, when every acre of land is held precious, though sometimes left fallow and often so poorly tended that it yields a negligible return. In any case, I think the beasts and birds of open country must look to the black buck for their salvation, for it is the one claimant for protection among them whose arresting looks and swift charm might succeed in attracting notice.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

pult rubber, and its hooves are not hard but elastic, its wind is almost inexhaustible and its vitality amazing.

No other animal I know of can keep going with such ghastly injuries, not even the greater cats. In particular I recall a gravid doe (does are usually faster than their overlords) that had lagged behind, and had a leg blown clean away by a bullet meant for the buck. The gun and I got into a jeep and went after the wretched thing, to put it out of its misery. The black-cotton soil was very flat, and permitted a fair speed, but for two miles the crippled doe kept running far ahead, while our pity turned to wonder and admiration, before it fell exhausted and was shot.

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These buck have a curious habit that is often their undoing. After outdistancing the chasing enemy easily, they turn at an angle and run across the path of the pursuer, so that by anticipating the move and changing his direction slightly the gun can frequently get to within range, as they cross in front. Dunbar Brander suggests that this habit might be due to a desire on the part of the buck to prove that they "have the legs of the enemy". Quite a likely explanation, but at times I have seen chased buck turn, not across the line of pursuit, but away from it. They seem to run in a curve, once they are clear of immediate danger, and they persist in their curved course once they are set on it. Naturally, this explanation leads to the question:

Date With A Bear

ALL this was in July last. When I joined the camp for bear at hilly Mukumpi, the monsoon had arrived already. Every evening there would be whirling winds, then drenching, disheartening rain until midnight that made the return home over-wet, slippery boulders a risky adventure. Mornings were spent in reconnaissance, trying to locate the haunts of the bears from their startlingly human tracks in

the soft, impressionable earth of the fields. There were many bears, but they seemed to have no favourite routes from the hills to their nocturnal feeding grounds. After three evenings of futile sitting up beside likely paths, we decided to concentrate on just one bear, a large, pious bear that was much given to visiting a remote Hanuman temple.

This was said to be the biggest of the local bears. The temple was on a hillock in the heart of the jungle, and occasionally visited by devotees, but the bear seemed a "regular." The rocky ground, with wiry grass where there was soil, gave us few defined footprints, but where the bear had crossed a nullah we saw its spoor—and there could be no doubt about its size.

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What brought the big beast to the temple so faithfully each night was the smallest of inducements, tiny bits of jaggery or rancid copra (left behind as offerings) once in a blue moon, and the oil smeared on the image of the god. I could hardly believe that a lick of oil, or a rare fragment of jaggery, could promote such punctilio in a bear, but the evidence was conclusive. The broad, blurred imprint of its haunches on the flat slab in front of Hanuman showed where the bear had been sitting for a long while, probably exploring

each interstice in the bas-relief with its tongue, for oil, and fresh clawmarks on the rocky soil, told their own tale.

There were three deep gashes across Hanuman's cheek, unmistakably caused by melursine claws (I am writing of the Sloth Bear, of course) and I was puzzled by the ease with which the bear's claws had grooved the rock till I took out my jack-knife and tried it, furtively, on the image. My knife cut through what I had thought was sandstone as if through stiff wax: the images in the shrine had been carved in low relief, then finished with a stucco consisting of some local ochre and oil, the raised details on face and figure being largely in stucco. I was told that these details were renewed, periodically. That explained why the bear licked the image so assiduously, for the oil in the stucco could not be sucked out or bitten off.

Sloth Bears work hard for their living, and it is well known that they take elaborate pains to secure some titbit, ridiculously out of proportion to the effort involved and their size. They will dig two feet through hard soil to get at a grub that their exquisite noses have located, and wander all night in search of berries. So, on consideration, there seemed nothing strange in the regularity of this temple-loving bear.

Our shikari was dead against



too obvious baiting for he rated the intelligence of these bears highly, and apparently this one was the grandfather of all bears. We left a few small pieces of jaggery strewn with artful carelessness about the shrine, and poured a little oil into a hollow in the stone steps, but that night a downpour drowned our cunning and washed our offerings clean away. Next evening we left the jaggery inside the shrine, and smeared the oil on the image of Hanuman, with better results. It rained that night as well, but this had not prevented the bear's visit, and in the morning we found the image licked dry, and a few pieces of jaggery gone, though the bear had had misgivings over some other pieces.

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That night we sat up for the beast, after studying every precaution. We chose a natural alcove in the rock, facing the shrine, sheltered from rain and shifting winds, and were in place before sunset. About 10 o'clock, through the swish and patter of the rain, we heard vague sounds as of some large animal moving, but though we had a powerful flashlight we did not use it, for it sounded too far away, and right behind us. It was clear from the tracks, in the morning, that the bear had come up behind us, and had halted about

(Continued on back page)

DATE WITH A BEAR

(Continued from Page 9)

thirty yards away, before retreating.

There is a theory that Sloth Bears are near-scented, and that while they can scent and locate a beetle's grub a yard underground, they do not smell danger when not too close to a man, the wind being "wrong" for them. Well, I can only say that our experiences at Mukumpi did not confirm this theory. Bears there seemed to have an uncanny ability to smell us out from afar, and I am even prepared to believe that this one scented us through solid rock from 30 yards away. We kept quite still and there was no question of a gust of wind carrying our scent towards it—still, it had been alarmed.

We baited the temple again next evening and came away, and sure enough the bear came that night and took our offerings. We sat up next night, and about midnight we returned home, sure that we had heard the beast come up and then go away. Next day we found that the bear had revisited the place after our departure, and spent quite some time inspecting our alcove. It had left behind a token of its contempt for us. Our shikari assured us, solemnly,

that the brute had deliberately intended insult.

I will not tire you with a recital of our further failures. Somehow that bear knew just when and where we sat up for it, and when we were not there. We did not even get a glimpse of it once, but we learned some interesting details of the conjugal habits of bears from the local worthies. They had even the legend about amorous old male bears carrying off village belles to their harems—a legend that interested me especially as I had heard it elsewhere, and was curious to know why bears of all beasts, (so horribly manlike when skinned), should be credited with this liking for comely young women. None of the natives could enlighten me on this point, but our shikari remarked, ungallantly, that the bears that had abducted the local maidens deserved sympathy rather than retribution, for there could be little doubt they had let themselves in for a rough time!

You may ask: why the triumphant headpiece for the account of unsuccessful trysts? That was drawn from a bear, just out of its cubhood, shot almost entirely by accident, and does not belong here at all—which is just why it is here. It shows the almost human soles of the hind legs clearly, and provides this note with the necessary bear.

COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

The Vanishing Bustard

RECENTLY I read a book on the common game birds of West Africa, and was surprised to find quite half-a-dozen bustards mentioned. I could not help comparing our one bustard with these exotic cousins, and pondering over its fate. I noted with pride that the Great Indian Bustard is far larger than any of its West African relatives: but, unlike them, it is doomed. I have met men who will not admit that the Hunting Leopard is virtually extinct in India, because they cannot bring themselves to believe that an animal they knew in their youth is already gone. But even they realize that our bustard is going, going, though not quite gone.

The Great Indian Bustard is a bird of the open country and very large, so that its presence anywhere is not hard to locate. It is a big fowl, nearly 40 lbs. when full grown (a prodigious weight for a flying bird) and four feet tall on its thick, yellow legs. It takes off with some difficulty and after the manner of an aeroplane, with a long run assisted by flapping wings. Once launched in the air, it gains height with lubberly beats of its sail-like wings, then soars on their stretched spread with surprising ease. However, it comes down to earth after a while, for it is essentially a ground bird. It carries its boat-shaped body like a boat, horizontally, and runs with its head and neck flung forward; it runs far more readily than it flies, and at a fair pace.

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In spite of its dull brown back and dull, earth-bound habits (no one will call it a vivacious bird), the white in its plumage against the dark ground and its size give it away from afar. It has not many enemies in the flat, bare country that it loves, but unfortunately it is excellent eating, and man has never forgotten this.

Man (especially the man with the gun) is entirely responsible for the fact that this wholly Indian and magnificent bird is on the verge of extinction, and only man can save it now. Let me explain that statement.

Animals do not become extinct because they are shot down to the last pair. In nature, every



species faces certain hazards, and survives in spite of them because if some of its members succumb others live to reproduce the species. There must be a minimum population for any species to survive, and the hazards of nature seldom reduce its numbers to below this minimum. This is what is implied in the much used phrase "the balance of nature", and this is not only a phrase but a proved fact as well, the principle underlying the running of any large sanctuary.

By shooting them, by infringing on their territory and driving them to fresh, unsuitable grounds

by
M. KRISHNAN

or overcrowding them, and in many other ways that may not be intentional, man reduces the numbers of some species to below its biological minimum. Then it becomes extinct. When such a fate is about to overtake any creature, only by preserving it jealously, by helping it in all possible ways to breed back to its biological minimum strength, can we save it.

I have reason to believe that in a dying race the reproductive instinct is exceptionally strong, but unless sufficient living space, food and protection are provided (artificially, by man) this last-minute resurgence cannot save the species.

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Our bustard is an useful bird, besides being ours, on the brink of extinction, and one of the largest of its tribe. It feeds mainly on locusts, grasshoppers, a variety of insects, and the like—the damage it does to cultivation is

more than offset by its beneficial influence.

Can we save it? I think it is possible, if governments will enforce protective measures without too long deliberation. The bird is already on the protected list—on paper. The penalties to be imposed on people shooting the bird should be made stricter—and they should be enforced. A fine will not deter a gourmet, especially when he does not realize that the bird he is shooting is not merely illegal game, but a representative of a dying race that is a hundred times more valuable than it would be otherwise because it is struggling to breed up to the biological minimum necessary for the survival of its tribe. Something must be done, harshly, effectively, to make the flesh of the bustard have a bitter taste to the man with the gun. Only governments can do such things—but is not the Great Indian Bustard a fit challenge to the resources and responsibilities of our national administration?

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It may be thought that already the bird is too far gone for any attempt to save it, however resolute. I do not think so. Someone told me, last week, that there were not half-a-dozen bustards now in Mysore State. Perhaps that was a highly exaggerated statement, but even if it was true, no matter. The Great Indian Bustard is not such a rara avis as it may seem at first sight. Last year I counted seven of these birds in the flat country surrounding the village of Hagedal, near Gajendragad in the Dharwar District. These bustards. I was informed, had defined beats. Two of them were noticeably subadult, with dark streaks on their necks: very likely these birds breed in that area. I do not know how many of those seven are extant today, but surely there must be other places like Hagedal?

Experienced sportsmen need no appeal not to point their guns at our bustard but how many gun-license holders know that the bird is rare and dying out? It is quite necessary to inform public knowledge on our vanishing fauna, and the need to preserve it. This, again, is something that only governments can do well. Private enterprise can make little headway in this direction; nor have I seen many appeals to the public on behalf of this bird. The only notice of it that I have seen, outside the writings of a few naturalists, was in an old drawing-book for schoolchildren, and here, too, the bird had been ill served, for it had been defamed, in thick black type!

... CHOUSINGHA ...

NOSTALGIC memories flooded in on me when reading Vic Rosner's account of Four-horned Antelopes in the Sunday Statesman of July 20; memories of eight years spent in a Deccan hill range, where these antelope were almost common.

Those hills are flat-topped, and covered with light, deciduous jungles and lush grass—they are among the oldest hills in the world, scarped along their shoulders and with boulder-strewn crowns. The rainfall averages about 36 inches a year, and the area holds sambar, pig, panther and an occasional tiger, but no bear (though bears lived here once upon a time). I mention these details as Chousingha (Four-horned Antelope) abound in these hills, and their distribution is somewhat capricious.



There are Chinkara in the rocky, open country immediately outside, but they never come up the hills; and the native Chousingha never stray into adjoining Chinkara territory. I was struck with this strict addiction to beats. Few people realize how vital suitable grounds are for wild animals, and how quickly they perish when driven out of their homes into strange country.

The Chousingha is unique. Not only is it the only living thing, bar freaks and fakes, with four horns, but it has also adopted some of the habits of deer, living in the woodland habitat favoured by deer. Those who want information about this remarkable antelope will find it in Dunbar Brander's "Wild Animals in Central India." I will not quote from the classic—and Vic Rosner's excellent article leaves me with very little excuse for the writing of this note.

However, I may justify this in some measure by referring to

M. Krishnan's COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

the Chousingha's abilities as a jumper. Except for the largest ones, antelopes are nimble on their feet and in Africa (the true home of the tribe) there are little antelopes that leap high and effortlessly and live in steep places. Our Chousingha is our



own, and distinguished from all others by the buck's four horns, but it is related to the African duikers.

The Chousingha has a high-stepping action and carries itself with a crouch—it is higher behind than in front, and walks in cover habitually. Its hooves are long along their treads and slightly splayed, ensuring a firm grip on sheer surfaces. Altogether it seems equipped for climbing up and down and moving furtively and fast through the under-

growth. However, it can jump when it wants to.

I have seen a doe clear a seven-foot-high hedge with the utmost ease, almost taking it in its stride. I was posted as stop in a frantic beat for a pair of Chousingha that had slunk into a patch of thick bush. The doe came galloping straight at me, saw me very late, spun round at right angles and with the same movement rose into the air and cleared the hedge by my side. On other occasions I have seen Chousingha in flight go sailing over obstacles in their path, like bushes and small boulders. It is well known that these forest-loving antelope bolt at considerable speed when alarmed, though they usually pull up and go into hiding pretty soon. But their leaping abilities seem to be less known.



Its love of undergrowth and steep, rocky slopes offers the Chousingha a certain natural immunity from the shikari. There is not much risk of this most remarkable little beast being shot out, but man can threaten it in another way, incidentally. During my last visit to that Deccan hill range I noticed that it was getting rather thin on top, and I, who have personal knowledge of such things, know what that portends—I know it surely, in my scalp. The incipient alopecia that I noticed will thrive on neglect, and spread apace. Then deer and Chousingha will go, from lack of suitable cover, and human indifference will kill them more ruthlessly than the gun can. But let us hope that I am mistaken, that man's ancient and primitive love for forests is really resurgent today, that it will move governments and survive their routine.

A Roving Robin

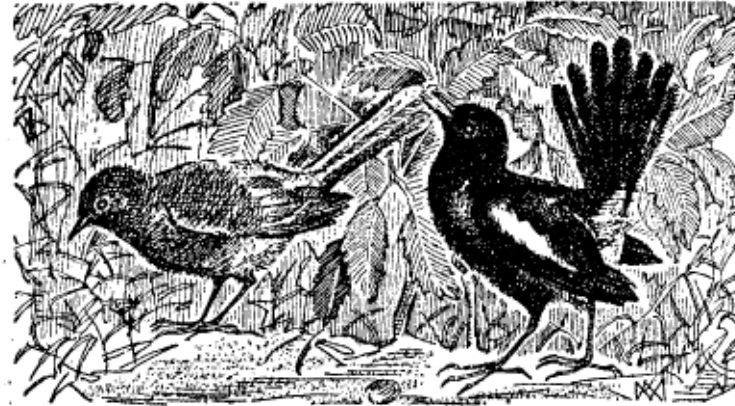
AUGUST was pretty much itself, where I spent the last week. The afternoons were portentous and still, and late in the evenings the rain came down in torrents, drenching the verandahs and gardens and the fields beyond, discovering weaknesses in the tile of my first-floor bedroom. There was a plastered terrace outside the bedroom, spacious and interrupted by the skylights of rooms below. Its parapets were dark and dank with rain-stains and moss, and in a corner a young banian had established a firm foothold.

Soon after my arrival here, I noticed a pair of black-backed robins, flitting from gable to parapet and back, wings drooped, tails fanning out and shutting suddenly close, courting somewhat obviously. The shrill song of the

I found their nest in a crevice in a skylight, empty and recently abandoned. Was this a pair whose first attempts had been inundated, trying bravely again, as birds will? Very likely, but soon I noticed a curious periodicity in their courtship—it was post-meridian. In the mornings the hen was alone, sprightly and flirting its tail, but alone on the terrace or in the garden, below. The cock was away till noon.

Almost by accident I discovered where the cock spent its mornings. It was in a far corner of the garden, rank with new grass and weeds, and there was another hen there. But this was a larger hen, and a more indifferent one. It seemed intent on early worms, and unaware of the puffed-out, strutting presence by its side, singing shrilly.

I made certain, of course, that this duplex cock was the same one that spent the afternoons near my room, and that the hens were different. Now, here was something distinctly odd. Perhaps the morning hen had lost its mate accidentally, but the breeding season was on the wane and there



were other suitors in the neighbourhood. One would suppose that some unattached first-season cock would have utilized the opportunity to mate late. In his Modern Bird Study, Griscom tells of a rather cruel American experiment, where a hen indigo bunting was successively deprived of its mates, and found nine mates in a brief period. In birds where sexual dimorphism is pronounced, as in these robins, it is hard for an unattached hen to escape the attentions of free cocks. And here was this widow-bird, suffering the attentions of a part-time suitor!

Moreover, the placid non-interference of the terrace hen puzzled me. Robins, especially during the breeding season, have strong terri-

torial feelings. Territory is established by the cock, but once it is established, the hen resents the intrusion of rivals into the area. One would suppose that a hen robin would take active interest in the attentions of its philandering mate to another hen, not fifty yards down the beat.

I cannot explain what I saw. I could not stay on at this place and watch further developments, but I saw enough to leave no doubts in my mind over the intentions of the bigamous cock. On my return home I looked into many books, hoping to find some explanation for this strange business, but found none. Is it possible that these unlettered birds have not heard of Territorial Insularity and the Rules of Monogamy?

by

M. KRISHNAN

cock robin has no appeal for me, but I like the trim, ivory-black bird and the way its tail goes up with a flick right over its back; and I like the mud-brown hen, too. Moreover I did not expect to find robins courting, in raw, wet, vegetative August.

A Warning To Aesthetes

SOME 30 years ago, an aesthetically-minded gentleman in the Andamans had an inspiration. The islands offered few social pleasures then; remember, it was settled with desperate convicts and inhabited by aborigines described, by an encyclopaedia of those days, as "savages of a low Negrito type." However, there was vegetative beauty enough, and gazing at opulent plantations and woods, it occurred to this gentleman that what was needed to transform the vista to a scene from fairyland was a herd of Chital in the foreground.

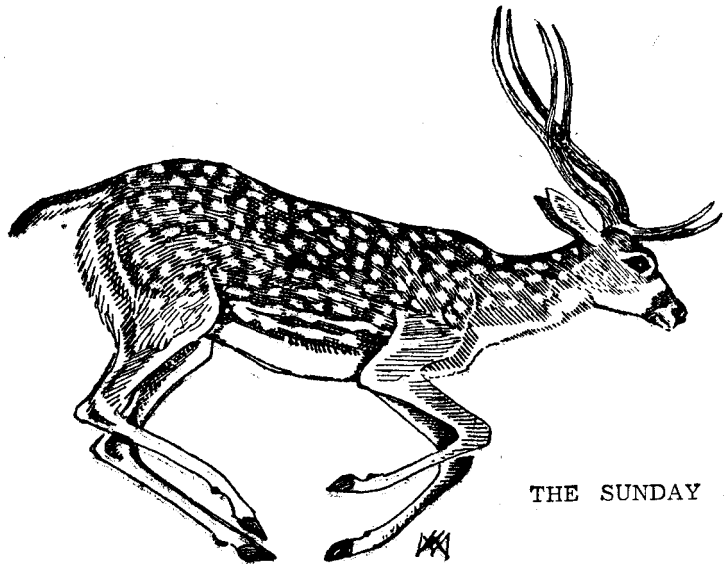
Only those who have seen this most decorative of all deer in a forest glade can know the charm they can impart to a woodland setting: I have always felt mildly surprised that Hopkins wrote "Glory be to God for dappled things..." without having seen Chital. Anyway, this gentleman lost no time in gilding the lily—he imported a few Chital into the islands from their native home.

★

Frequently it happens that impulsive importations have unexpected consequences, and these Chital were no exception. Any competent naturalist could have predicted the result—Chital are very hardy, very prolific, and large enough to resist the smaller predators (the Andamans contain no greater cats). I quote from a recent news item featuring the tour-report of the Inspector-General of Forests to the Government of India, after a visit to the islands:

The introduction of chital (spotted deer) from the mainland 30 years ago is regretted. In the absence of their natural enemies they have become as great a menace as rabbits in Australia. The report announces the arrival of two female panthers in the islands to check any further increase in the number of chital.

Well, that sort of thing will happen. However, it is obvious to the critical reader that if all that is now sought to be done is to check further increase in the Chital population, the comparison with rabbits in Australia is exaggerated. I have never been to Australia—



THE SUNDAY STATESMAN,

lia—for that matter, I have never been to the Andamans, but I understand the rabbit position there is really menacing.

It has happened, almost invariably, that wherever man tries to improve nature by importing exotic plants or animals, they have perished from inability to acclimatize themselves, or else they have overrun the land. Take the Lantana, for instance. Its

this case. Panthers are the natural enemies of Chital, all right. They have an appetite for Chital flesh that is not easily satiated. Chital are not shy of human neighbourhood and enter plantations freely; in fact, that is why they are a nuisance in the islands. They can be shot down easily; the introduction of natural foes that will give them a chance of survival, in preference to mas-

M. KRISHNAN'S Country Notebook

conquest of India is surely the most rapid and complete in the history of our much-conquered country—and it was never actually introduced into India; it was brought to Ceylon, and just leapt across the ocean in the gizzards of migrating birds.

Why must men upset the balance of nature? The shooting down of animals ruthlessly, without thought of the survival of species or the way it upsets the well-tryed equilibrium of God, is something that is even more reprehensible than thoughtless importations. It is going on all over India, but it is only the animals that perish, and so no one cares. When they flourish overmuch, as these Chital in the Andamans do, it is then that we are moved to quick action.

I would like to point out the soundness of the action taken in

sacre, is a laudable action.

But why "two female panthers"? Of course what follows is largely guesswork, but I think they are going cautiously. Apparently the instance of the importation of mongooses to check the rat menace in the sugarcane plantations of Jamaica is being remembered, besides rabbits and Australia. Those mongooses did their job well and suppressed the rats: then they turned their attentions to the poultry runs. Too many leopards in the Andamans can lead to highly unpleasant consequences, for panthers turn quite often to domestic stock when other hunting fails them, as I, who have lost many milch-goats to them, know well. I grant that the application of the analogy is hardly apt or direct, but perhaps the story of King Log and King Stork has also been remembered!