NATIONAL BIRD OF INDIA

By M. KRISHNAN

Mr. M. Krishnan is recognized as one of India's leading naturalists and as a tireless campaigner for the preservation of wild life and the protection of natural beauty. His knowledge of the fauna and flora of this country is encyclopaedic, and his articles—illustrated often by photographs taken by him and on occasions by black-and-white sketches of rare delicacy—are read all over India. His "Country Notebook" articles have been appearing in The Statesman Sunday Magazine for many years ; he gave up the life of an official to become one of India's most successful free-lance journalists.

The choice of the peacock as India's National Bird is a singularly happy one, but it was by no means spontaneous. In fact, a lengthy period of cogitation and discussion by an advisory body (the Indian Board for Wild Life) only resulted in the peacock being suggested provisionally as the National Bird, and some further time elapsed before this recommendation was accepted and became final.

At an earlier stage, while the choice of a suitable bird emblem for the nation was being debated, quite a few other birds were seriously considered. Three of these, the Sarus Crane, the Great Indian Bustard, and the Brahminy Kite, may be mentioned here as their claims were warmly pressed and they were, at one time, reckonable contenders for the honour.

I suppose what weighed most with those that had the responsibility of choosing our National Bird was the representative Indian character of the birds suggested and, to a lesser extent, their decorative, emblematic looks. The extent to which the bird proposed would lend itself to symbolic depiction must also have counted and, naturally, the fact that a very similar-looking bird was already the national emblem of another country must have been a bar.

A National Bird should have wide distribution all over the country, or else be peculiar to it. The kiwi of New Zealand and the nene of Hawaii are examples of the last claim, the American Bald Eagle and the heraldic eagle of Germany of the first. The association of the bird proposed with the country's legends, folklore and mythology is also an important factor, and the bird must be widely known. I detail these rather theoretical considerations *after* the peacock has been firmly and finally selected as our National Bird to point out how apt and admirable the choice was.

Judged by these considerations, the Sarus gets disqualified. Mind you, I have nothing against this picturesque, stately, five-foot-tall crane ; it is the Crouncha Pakshi of our puranas, is common and confiding where it is found, and has a touchingly powerful attachment to its mate. But it is not an all-India bird and millions of our countrymen do not know it.

The Great Indian Bustard must also be disqualified for the same reason ; moreover, though it is big and heavy and impressive both in flight and in courtship display, it does not lend itself readily to formalised depiction. The main argument in its favour seems to be that the magnificent bustard is now on the brink of extinction in our country, and needs popular recognition and support.

The Brahminy Kite, though much smaller than the Sarus and the bustard (and the peacock) has very distinctive and handsome looks ; it is the Garuda of our mythology, though in places in India other raptorial birds are identified with the Garuda. This kite is an all-India bird all right (in fact, its range extends well beyond our country) but I don't think it would have been a sound choice. Although it is quite different, as a bird, from the American Bald Eagle, as an emblem it is strikingly similar to America's National Bird. Incidentally, no one seems to have pointed out so far that all the four Indian birds mentioned here are, in their way, famed as serpent killers !

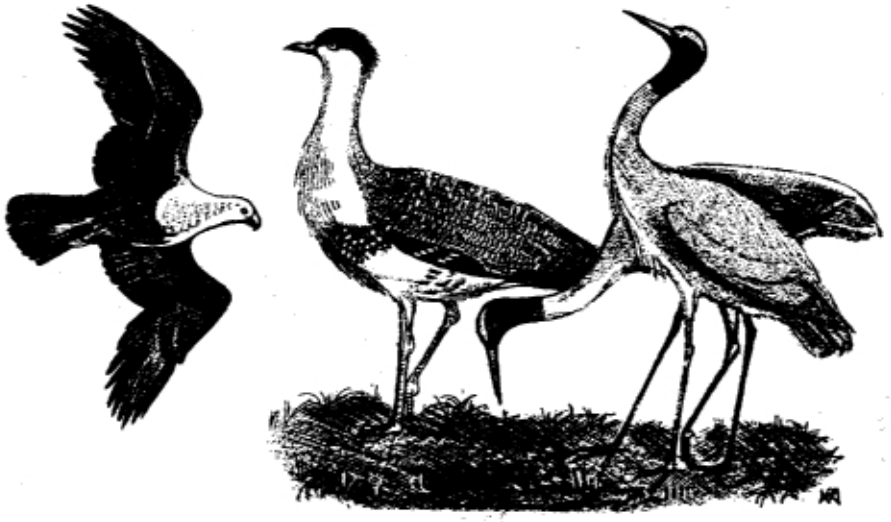
The peacock is the one bird that fully satisfies all tests. It has an all-India distribution and is almost exclusively Indian (the Burmese peacock, with a lanceolate crest, is distinct, and in Ceylon—the only other country where our peacock is found—it is acknowledged as the Indian Peacock), it is known to every little child in our country, and even in countries outside, and it is anciently and deeply associated with our legends and religious traditions. It has an honoured place in our art and literature and pageantry, and although familiarity does tend to blunt one's perception of beauty, the fact remains that it is one of the most arrestingly beautiful birds in the world.

Before going on to the peacock in our mythology, art and pageantry, a brief account of its natural history might be provided. Peafowl do not ascend our mountain ranges to any great height, but they are quite at home in many deciduous hill-jungles,

up to about 4000 feet. They are even more at home in the jungles of the plains (most of which have been lost to wild creatures through human occupation of such jungles) and even in flat scrub-jungles, where there are perennial streams. They do not enter evergreen forests. They are thirsty birds, and must have an assured water supply—they are not to be found far from streams and rock-girt forest pools.

The tail of the cock is not much different from the hen's—the cock's chief adornment, the superb train of ocellated plumes, actually consists of the feathers above the tail, the upper tail—coverts, and in a really fine bird the train may be 5-foot long. However, this long and luxuriant train is no great impediment to the bird in its wanderings through bush and thorn—and peafowl are great walkers. If you take a good look at the plumes of the train, you will note how light and pliantly strong they are. The bird has no difficulty in carrying its train clear of the ground when running through the bush.

Peafowl are polygamous and in the breeding season (soon after the rains) the cocks are much given to their spectacular displays—this is probably why their display is associated popularly with the cock's alleged love of rain. There is no need to describe the display, which everyone has seen and admired, but it may be said that to appreciate to the full the shimmering splendour of the spectacle, and the iridescent play of blue and green and violet and gold in the bird's plumage as it struts and postures and shivers its fanned out train with a rustle, one must see the cock's 'dance' in a forest setting. Incidentally, this display does not seem to have a purely sexual significance, and probably has social and extra-specific communication as well. Some 30 years ago there was a peacock in the Madras Zoo that was given to displaying to a tortoise ; G. M. Henry mentions having seen a peacock displaying in front of a tortoise in Ceylon, and Konrad Lorenz in Germany.



The three major contenders. Left : Brahminy Kite ; Middle : Great Indian Bustard ; Right : The Sarus, which would have posed a problem, had it been chosen, the pair being inseparable, even in an emblem !

Though mainly dependent on their sturdy legs for escape from danger (the cock's legs are spurred, and are also used as weapons of offence), peafowl can fly fast when they have to, as when crossing a stream or a deep nullah, or when they fly up to a treetop to roost for the night. They are groundbirds, and spend the day on the ground. Their sharpness of vision is notorious, and their hearing is excellent, too.

White peafowl, so much admired in England in mid-Victorian times, are only albinos, and though a true-breeding white strain is something bred by man, I believe albinos do occur occasionally even in a wild state.

Peafowl feed on a variety of vegetable substances (seeds, certain flowers, and buds, in the main), and also on insects and small reptiles ; it is true that they do kill small snakes.

No other bird is so closely associated with the religious and art traditions of our country. Throughout the South, the peacock is protected and honoured as Subramanya's *vahana*, and the God is rarely depicted without the bird in our sculpture, iconography, and handicrafts. Even in religious poetry, the peacock goes with the God.

As a decorative motif, the figure of the peacock has been rendered masterfully by our old-time sculptors. The unmistakable profile of the bird, strong and rhythmically balanced, has been preferred to detailed depiction of its vivid plumage. Even in traditionally fashioned rose-water sprinklers and other decorative silverware, the bird is usually shown in repose and not in display. Bell-metal peacocks, shown in display, used to be popular in the old days in the South, and in these little figurines the fanned out train was treated formally, with a few engraved eyes marking the ocelli.

From time immemorial peacock plumes have figured in royal and religious pageantry ; the fans of peacock plumes used in 'darbars' and on special occasions in shrines must be familiar to everyone. A rather formalised rendering of the peacock in gold lace was much in vogue many years ago, as a decoration on the borders of South Indian silk sarees ; recently the bird has been more effectively exploited in the design of silk sarees, a simplified version of the bird being used as a decoration, with a few eyes picked out on its train in brilliant blues and violets and gold lace.

Indian Water-Birds and Waterside-Birds

Written & illustrated by: **M. KRISHNAN**

Introducing a series on Indian Wild Life

We have pleasure in introducing a new series on Indian Wild Life by Shri M. Krishnan, noted naturalist, who is no stranger to our readers his article having appeared in this journal quite a few times.

The present series is entitled 'Indian Water-birds and Water-side birds' which appears in three parts — (i) 'Introduction: Water-side birds', (2) 'Indigenous water-birds' and (3) Migratory Water-birds'. Each instalment is illustrated by black and white photographs by Shri Krishnan.

The following is the first part.

INTRODUCTION: WATERSIDE-BIRDS

OUR culture is notable for its scientific natural history. Most of the references to animals and birds in our folklore and classical literatures are highly imaginative and anthropomorphic, and therefore untrue to nature. We have no names even for a great many birds, especially for woodland and scrub birds: for instance, though the koel is well known and widely celebrated in lyrics all over India, there are no names for the papiha and the Indian cuckoo in Tamil and Kannada, though both are to be heard almost incessantly in the forests of both states for months on end. One of the most gorgeously plumaged of our birds, the forest-loving trogon, has no vernacular name, and even such common woodland birds as the Scops owls, the cuckoo-shrikes and the wood-shrikes have no specific names. Even where we do find names for a group of closely related birds, such as the kingfishers, the woodpeckers, or the wagtails, we have no names indicative of each variety of them. It may seem surprising, in the midst of this paucity and vagueness of specific names, to find that almost all our water-birds and waterside-birds have individual names in Indian languages.

Actually, this is nothing surprising. Many of our water-birds and shore-birds, it is true, also feed and breed in remote marshes, islands and other places far from human dwellings, but they are also much given to haunting irrigation canals, paddy fields and village tanks in the countryside: quite a few of the crowded mixed breeding colonies of these birds are sited in trees standing in village tanks, and every year while breeding they have been sedulously protected by rustic sentiment, so that they have continued to breed in the same location for centuries. The well-known water-bird sanctuary of Vedanthangal was so protected for generations before it was accorded governmental recognition as a sanctuary, and there are other similar examples. Seeing the birds at close quarters every day for some three months or longer, while they are breeding, and not merely gaining occasional glimpses of them in the treetops as in the case of woodland birds, it was only natural that people should have given specific names for the many kinds of water-birds and waders familiar to them. In fact, the most notable of the very few nuggets of authentic and acutely observed natural history in the morass of fanciful accounts in

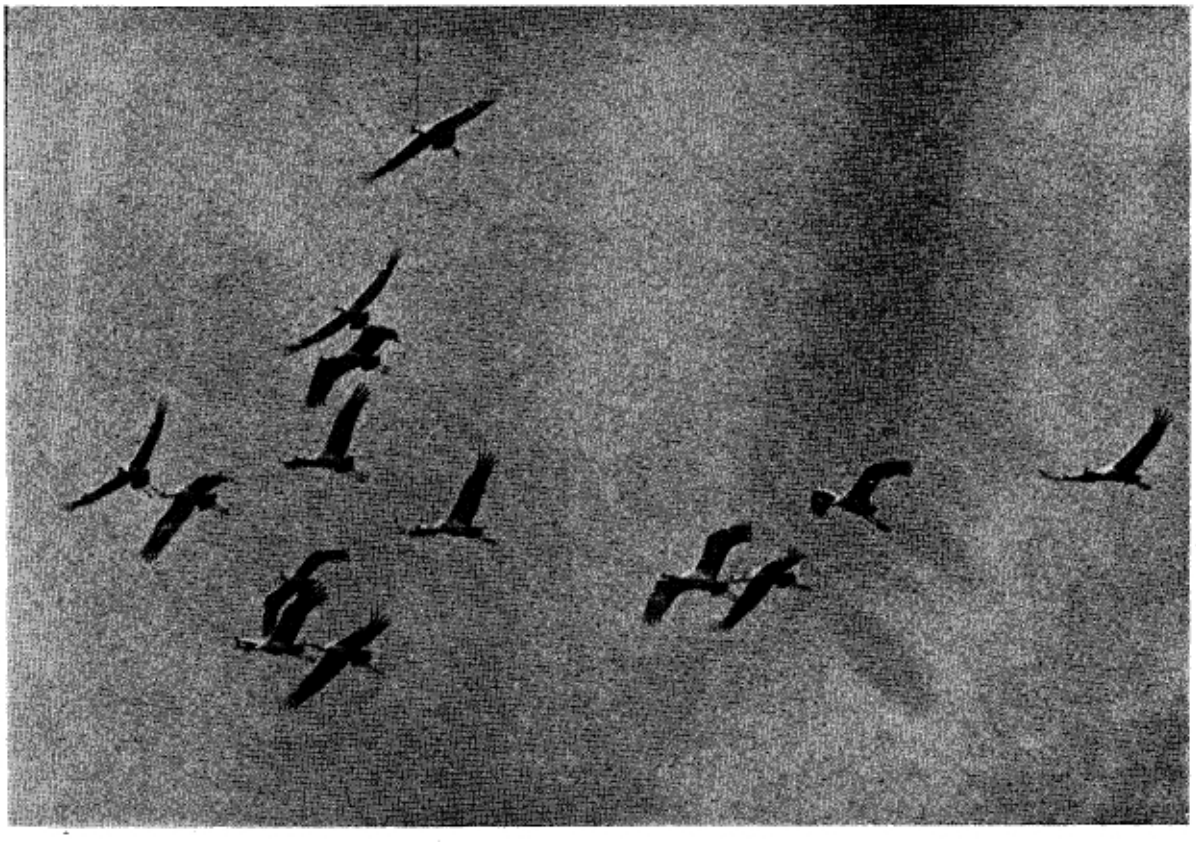
classical poetry are descriptions of migratory water-birds and their habits—I shall return to this point in the final section of this series.

What are water-birds and waterside-birds and what is the line of distinction between them? It is a thin line at times, and the basis for the distinction is only that the birds that feed and spend much time in the water are termed water-birds and that those that keep to the shore or wade the shallows are waterside-birds. Both terms are only names for two assortments of birds, each with its own habitat preference, and not taxonomic classes: both groups include related as well as unrelated birds and also both residents (birds that live and breed in our country) and migrants, that visit India during winter from their northern homes after breeding and which do not breed during their stay with us.

The rest of this section will be devoted to our most familiar waterside-birds, the cranes, the rails and crakes, plovers, sandpipers and snipe, stilts, avocets, stone plovers, wagtails, and a few other birds given to haunting the vicinity of streams and open sheets of water.

The sarus is our only resident crane, but it is the tallest and most stately of all cranes, as tall as a man and slim-built, a clear French grey all over except for reddish legs and a patch of red on the top of the head. It is almost invariably found in pairs, the male being slightly larger than its mate, and is said to be the Crouncha-pakshi of our *puranas* celebrated for the attachment of a pair to one another. It is a familiar bird of the neighbourhood of large sheets of water in north India, less common in peninsular India, and not found in the country south of the Godavari. Two other migratory cranes that arrive here in large numbers during the cold weather should be mentioned, the common crane which is no longer common, and the demoiselle, a dainty little crane with decorative plumes on the head and breast, which comes as far south as Tamil Nadu.

part of a flight of Demoiselles



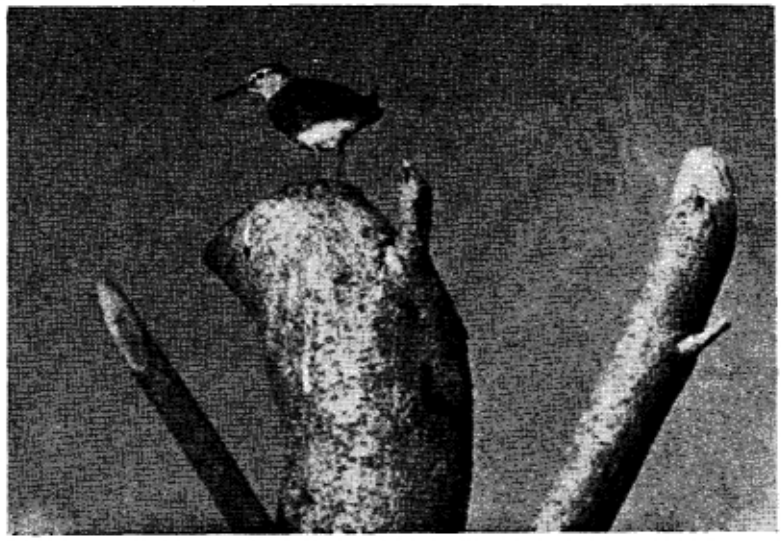
The most familiar of the group that includes the rails and the crakes is the whitebreasted waterhen. The birds of this group are small, loose-plumaged and dumpy, with long legs and toes, and rounded wings: they are not much given to flying and when they do fly, the flight seems weak and wobbly, but some of them are migratory and have actually come to India from distant countries, flying hundreds of miles. They are much given to skulking in reed-beds and thick vegetation bordering water, and to loud, unearthly calls, remarkable in volume and variation for such small birds. The Indian moorhen, the purple moorhen and the coot also belong to this group, though they are water-birds rather than waterside-birds, properly speaking. The Indian moorhen is a dark, somewhat ducklike bird with a red bill and a patch of conspicuous white behind its tiptilted tail, unmistakable from its habit of swimming with quick, sharp jerks of its head, as if the jerks of its head serve to propel it through the water! The gorgeously coloured purple moorhen (an iridescent purple all over, with a thick vermillion bill) is a rather shy bird of spreads of water fringed with vegetation and holding aquatic plants, and the coot, all-black with the bill and a white shield on the forehead a pure white in contrast, is a well-known bird of worldwide distribution.

The jacanas or 'lily-trotters' are rather like waterhens in appearance, but have even longer toes which help them to run over surface vegetation. The two jacanas of our country, the pheasant-tailed and the bronze-winged, are both resident.

The family of the plovers and the lapwing consists of a great many medium-sized and small shore birds, so many that only a few can be a briefly mentioned here—many of these are migratory Everyone knows the redwattled lapwing and its 'did-he-do-it?' alarm call, sounded on the least provocation—you will find this lapwing wherever there is a pond or pool or lake.* Its cousin, the yellow-wattled lapwing, is a little smaller, and has yellow instead of red wattles, and is more given to dry scrubs. Both are resident. Among the plovers, which are typical shore birds, may be mentioned the grey plover, the sand plover, and the ringed plovers, all of them migratory, though some ringed plovers are resident, the migratory avocet with its thin, upcurved bill and the black-winged stilt, so common on the fringes of tanks and lakes, which is resident.

Another vast group of waders and marsh birds is made up of the sandpipers, snipe and their allies, the last so expressively termed "snippets" by Eha—many of these, too, are migratory. The largest of them is the hen-sized curlew, which is a migrant: the sandpipers, as a class, are also migratory, the commonest of them being named, aptly, the common sandpiper—other well-known sandpipers are the Terek and green sandpipers, the greenshank and the redshank, and the stints. All the several kinds of snipe we get during the cold weather are migratory, but the allied painted snipe is a resident—the female painted snipe is larger and richer plumaged than the male and is polyandrous.

Common Sandpiper atop deadwood in a creek



* See second cover of this issue for a picture of the great Stone Plover

The stone plovers, much mottled and an over-all earth-brown from a distance, form a small group by themselves.* The largest of them, the great stone plover, has the enormous eyes of its tribe, and is a bird of sandy river-beds all over the country. The related crab plover is almost equally large, and does feed mainly on crabs.

Wagtails (so fittingly named, being so addicted to quick, small movements of their long tails) are familiar birds of river-side and streams and pools. The largest of them, the pied wagtail, is resident, but the rest (the white, the grey and the yellow, among others) are all migratory and to be seen here only during the time it is winter in their northern homes.

The cattle egret, though it often follows grazing animals (for the sake of the insects flushed from the cover of the ground herbage by their hooves) well away from water, is a typical waterside-bird. It is often to be found in small flocks along irrigation ditches and in paddy fields, hunting its prey in the mire and the margins of the ditches. Incidentally, in recent years it has spread from south-east Asia to Africa and beyond.

Another bird that must be mentioned here is the Brahminy kite (called 'garuda' in many Indian languages), the handsome, round-tailed chestnut kite with a white head, neck and breast: it is seldom absent from shallow water, both along the coast and far inland, seeking its prey in the marginal water and on the shore.

* See third cover of this issue for a picture of Redwattled Lapwings

Next Issue : INDIGENOUS WATER-BIRDS

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(*Sd.*) **K. Rangaswami**
Publisher

INDIAN WATER-BIRDS AND WATERSIDE BIRDS

Written & illustrated by M. KRISHNAN

MIGRATORY WATER BIRDS

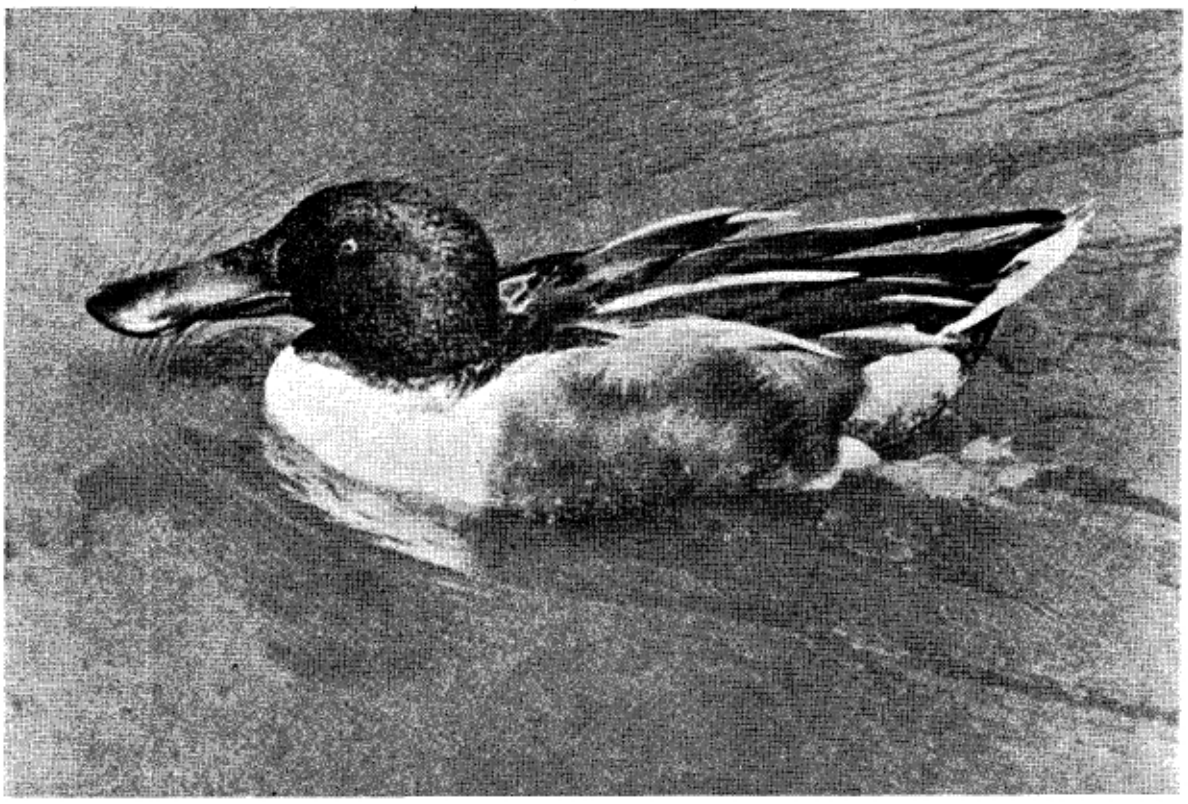
Third & Final instalment in a series

THE grey pelican is a resident, but two others, the rosy, (or white) and the Dalmatian pelicans, come to northern waters as migrants during winter: they may be seen then in numbers in many north Indian preserves, Bharatpur and Sultanpur Jheel, for instance.

Swans, which figure so prominently in our mythology, folklore and sculpture, are unknown, even as migrants, in our country. Some pundits have sought to provide a factual basis for fanciful mythology and iconography by arguing that it is not really a swan that is meant by the term *hamsa* (*annam*) in our traditional lore, but a goose. Even so, both the kinds of geese that are known in India, the greylag and the barheaded goose, are known only as cold-weather visitors—of these, the greylag is practically restricted to north India, but the barheaded goose ranges farther south, as far as Tamil Nadu. Both these have no splendid crest or convolute upper tail-coverts, as the swan of iconography has—neither does any true swan. Anyway, the ability of the wholly legendary Indian (*hamsa* or *annam*) to separate the essence from the dross (the milk from water in an admixture, as per southern traditions), while truly miraculous, is possessed by no bird on earth.

Ducks are dominant among the migratory waterfowl crowding our tanks and lakes in winter. Except for a few resident varieties (the whistling teal, the cotton teal, the spotbill, and the nukhta or comb duck) all the varied assortment that visits us in winter are migratory—pintail, many kinds of teal, millard, gadwall, pochards of different kinds, shoveller, *et al*.

A typical migratory duck—the Shoveller



Flamingos in a lagoon

Some storks also come here as migrants. Two of these, the black stork and the white stork, are the most notable of these. The black stork has a comparatively limited range, confined to north India, but the larger white stork travels southwards as far as Sri Lanka. Although it is not common, formerly it was by no means unknown in the southern reaches of the Tamil country, and though it is never seen in obtrusive numbers but only singly or in a pair, the contrast of the dazzling white of its plumage and the scarlet of its beak and legs against the sombre greens and browns of the countryside, renders it conspicuous, and centuries ago Tamilians knew it well, as the 'red-legged stork'. One of the oldest extant poems of Tamil, some 18 centuries old, is a celebrated address by an indigent poet to a white stork, during winter. The bird is described unmistakably in the opening lines ;

'O red-legged stork,
with the coral-red beak,
tapering to a point
like the split tap-root of the
sprouting palmyra'

The poem goes on to charge the stork with a message to the poet's poverty-stricken wife on its northern return flight :

'When you and your mate
turn northward from the
southern waters of the
Kumari,
halt at the pond of my
village'.

Here is conclusive evidence that almost 2000 years ago, when western science was nonexistent people in the Tamil country knew the basic facts of migration, that the white stork came south as a visitor and turned home northwards at the end of its sojourn here—remember that even so recently as the days of Gilbert White, western naturalists thought that perhaps the swallow, which disappeared with the onset of winter, hibernated through the rigours of winter safe-buried in the sandy beds of rivers!

Flamingos breed in Africa and other countries, and also in the Rann of Cutch. After they are through with breeding, they migrate to many coastal lagoons in south India—today Point Calimere is famous for its hordes of flamingos that arrive soon after the northeast monsoon, but not long ago they were also there farther south, at Danushkodi and Kanyakumari—and around Madras, where they are still to be found in numbers. Another poem by a different poet, of more or less the same

antiquity, and also entrusting the bird with a message (to his patron) is Pisir Aanthayaar's address to a flamingo, to be delivered on its homeward return-flight. This verse, poetically much the lesser of these two addresses, is quite astonishing for the acutely observed knowledge of the flamingo's feeding habits that it displays. Till fairly recently, western science had no knowledge of the flamingo's specialised feeding habits or the adaptation of its bent bill for ingesting minute organisms from the muddy silt of lagoons. In this old poem, addressing the flamingo, the poet says;

> 'having fed on minute prey in the waters
> of the beautifui bay of Kumari'!

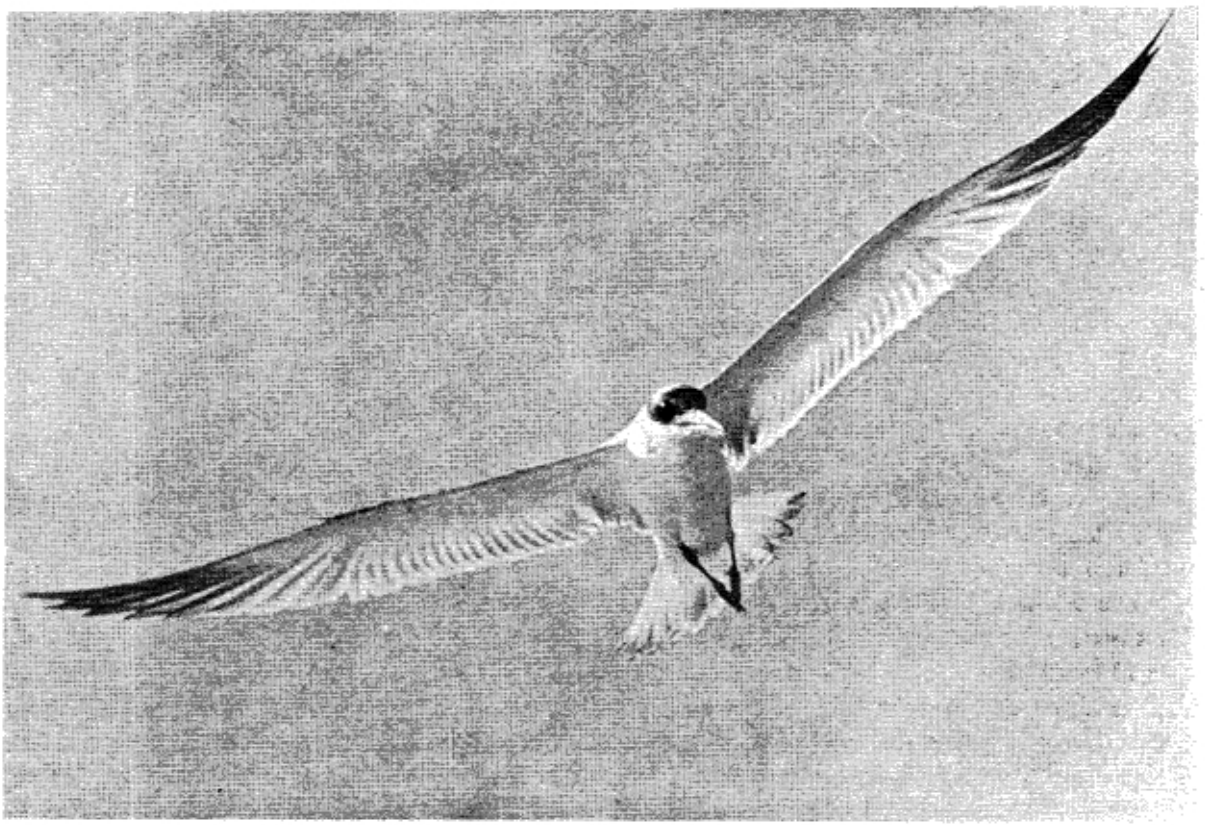
This verse also refers to the flamingo turning northward on its return flight. Both kinds of flamingos, the larger and the lesser, are to be found along the Tamilian coastline from November to February.

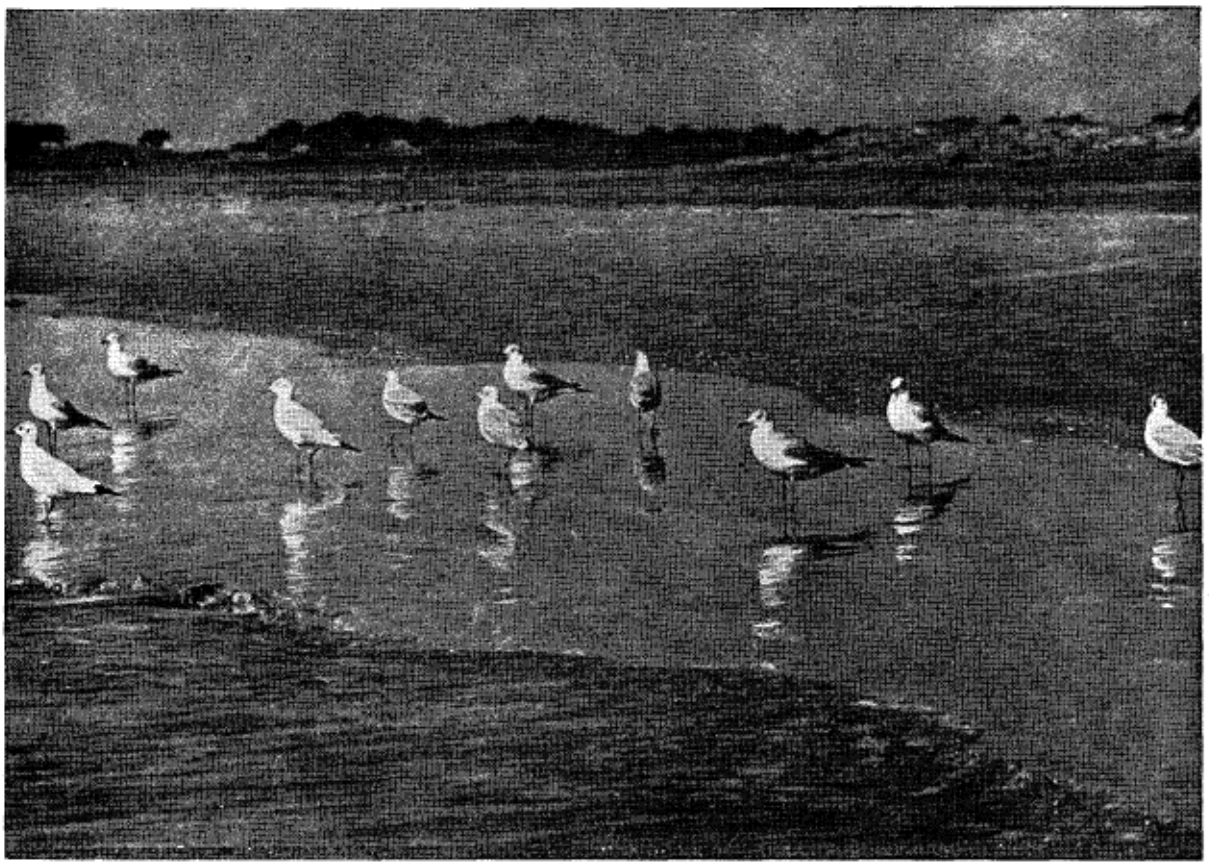
No account of our migratory water-birds can be complete without mention of the oceanic birds that are such a feature of our coasts. India, being a very large peninsula with a triangular shape, has a very long coastline, and many kinds of oceanic birds are to be found along this vast stretch, petrels, shearwaters, frigate birds and suchlike. These are not known to most people, but the terns and gulls are familiar to evetyone, and I shall mention only these here.

These come to our shores after breeding in their northern homes, as all migrants do. Now, birds put on their finest feathers when courting and mating (human analogies are not far to seek!), and afcer breeding, by the time they come here, they have shed their nuptial finery and assumed a more sober garb —they are said to be in eclipse plumage, and are less colourful, workaday paperbacks of their more opulent hard-cover editions. The gulls and terns that haunt our sealine and lagoons are in eclipse plumage.

Terns are the most graceful of oceanic birds: some of them, like the river tern, come far inland, and breed in our country. The oceanic terns, howevr are mainly migratory perhaps the commonest of them is the Gullbilled tern, which is a rather small bird with

Caspiean Tern





Brown headed gulls in eclipse plumage

the typical graceful tern build, white with pale grey wings, a tail with a slight fork, and a strong black bill and some black on the top of its head. It flies effortlessly over the coastal sea and follows boats, tacking its way on tireless wings against a stiff breeze, twisting and turning amazingly at top speed, and pouncing down upon the fish beneath the water in a headlong dive, much in the manner of a kingfisher. All terns feed like that, and their air mastery is truly remarkable. They spend hours on end in the air, with spells of brief rest on a sandspit or rock.

There are many other terns, but I shall mention only the most magnificent of them all, the Caspian tern, almost gull-sized, white below and pale grey on top, with the top of the head black and the bill a brilliant coral-red. Like most terns it has large eyes, the better to spot the prey lurking beneath the surface of the sea.

There are quite a few gulls that come to our shores, and haunt the coastline and harbours for months on end, but I shall mention only the commonest, the brownheaded and black-headed gulls (which, being in eclipse plumage, are almost whiteheaded!), the herring gull, and even the great blackheaded gull at times. Gulls are aptly called the "crows of the sea" in Tamil, for besides catching their own prey, they also feed on offal and on anything edible thrown out of the boats and ships, which they follow persistently. They are strong fliers, but much less expert than the terns, and have broad wings on which they sail on a carrying breeze when they can: they are also more gregarious as a class than the terns. When they need to rest, they sit in rows on the shore or on a sandspit, or simply plop down to the sea, riding the water high and bobbing up and down with the passage of the wave currents beneath them.

(Concluded)

The Songbirds of India

by M. Krishnan

IT is always unrewarding to begin anything with a definition; one is committed thereafter to rigid limitations. And especially is it undesirable to be handicapped like that when one wants, as I do, to have scope for personal preferences and a certain licence in writing about an undeniably poetic subject, like our songbirds. But it is for this precise reason that I would like a definition straight away, for why cannot the licence be incorporated into the definition? What, after all, is a songbird?

For once, the dictionary is unhelpful; it says that a songbird is a bird that sings, and that gets us nowhere. It is at such times that one feels the need for positive, authoritative opinion, and luckily we have Dr. W. H. Thorpe with us, perhaps the greatest living authority on bird-song. In his recent book, "Bird-Song", he says: "But is there anything behind this universal popular conviction that birds sing, in the sense of making music? If we ask the musician or the musicologist to define music, we are likely to get a confusing answer. According to Redfield (1935), there are eight factors involved in music: melody, harmony, rhythm, form, tempo, dynamics, form, colour and nuance. A moment's thought will serve to show that all except harmony, and possibly nuance (which is so vague an idea as to be difficult to assess in this connection) are present in innumerable examples of bird-song; and even the absence of harmony does not seem to be very fundamental since it has been truly said that harmony is, after all, merely simultaneous instead of successive melody. Rhythm there certainly is . . . . . That bird-song has form is self-evident: if it had not, we could not remember it. That it has tempo is obvious, for tempo is the rhythm's rate of progress."

I will halt the quotation here, for there are pages of it; Dr. Thorpe's conclusion, that birds do sing, will do for us. With scientific thoroughness and caution he points out: "But of course it is entirely unjustifiable to conclude that because many bird-songs sound beautiful to our ears, they necessarily seem beautiful to the bird." In short, we do not know how bird-song sounds to avian listeners, entrancing or otherwise. Therefore, we are limited to our own judgment of the appeal of bird-song. This is the gambit I have been seeking, and I am sure you will permit me to go by my own ear and preferences in writing this note—since I am writing it: Let us now turn, recklessly, from cold logic and science to our lyric poetry.

The bulbul, the shama, several parasitic cuckoos (chief among them the koel and the hawk-cuckoo), the skylark, drongos, the mynah (rather generically), the parakeet, the dove (again, rather generically), and, of all birds, the peacock, are the birds whose voices have been mentioned by our poets. In saying this, I am going by my own knowledge of classical Tamil and less classical Tamil, and to a lesser extent, by Hindi "fillumi-geet" and an account, heard long ago, of Assamese folk-songs. It could well be that this list is not comprehensive, but it is certainly representative of the attitude of Indian devotional and lyric poetry towards our songbirds.

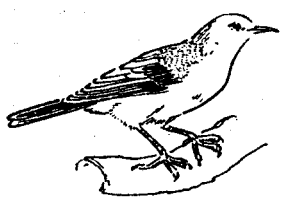
Let us compare this list briefly with the songbirds of English poetry: the skylark, the cuckoo, the blackbird, the dove, the nightingale, the thrush, and may be a finch or two. We, too, have thrushes and blackbirds in our hills, but no songs about them; our poets, perhaps, lived in the plains country: A pity, for I think Meredith's "The Darkling Thrush" the finest poetic address to a bird ever written, and had any of our poets felt the same fervour for the bird (though, of course, it would be a different thrush here), I could have had sufficient excuse to quote it.

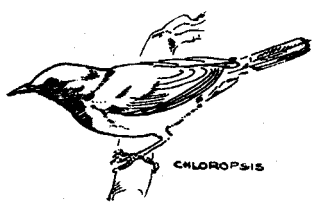
The naturalist's list of our songbirds will include many names unfamiliar to the layman, but then

these birds are among the most talented of avian singers. Should they be detailed here? I think it would be best to be selective in presenting them. Some of them are very local, or otherwise limited, in their distribution, and are therefore unknown to the majority of Indians—a typical example is the Malabar Whistling Thrush, which is found in rapid, rocky hill streams, mainly in sections of the Western Ghats; those who have heard its rambling but remarkably rich whistled song, clear above the turbulent water, in the cold of the early morning or late evening, can never forget it—but it must be left undescribed here because most people will not know it. Similarly, I am not mentioning any hill-bird, however delightful its song.

And I am including one or two birds whose song is little more than a call, because their call is so musical, however limited. Now for our songbirds. Let us follow the lead of our poets, and turn to the **bulbuls** first. Almost immediately we have to turn away, reluctantly, for as 'Eha' pointed out long ago, the bulbul does not sing outside the pages of oriental lyric poetry (which, of course, includes today's cinema songs!). As a tribe bulbuls have rollicking, cheerful voices, very pleasant in spite of repetition and, at times, enlivened with an undercurrent of excitement; but the fact remains that they are not, strictly speaking, songbirds. Their calls are too cheery and lively for such listing!

Another bird that may be mentioned here is the **iora**, a vivacious little bird, the size of a sparrow


IORA


CHLOROPSIS

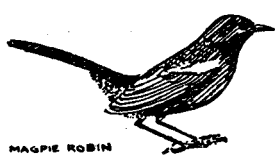
and bright yellow in colour, which is quite common in the scrub and in bush-grown gardens, and which has a very human whistle. This whistle, however, is little varied, and never becomes a song.

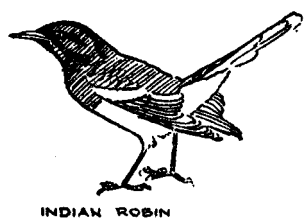
The **chloropsis**, once called the 'green bulbul', is a more accomplished bird; there are two varieties of it, both excellent mimics, but though on occasion they may imitate a snatch of some bird's song, they do not sing themselves.

Most people will know the **magpie robin**, a trim, pied, black-and-white bird, that is fond of gardens with trees and bushes in them. The cock is black above and white below the breast, with a white bar in each black wing, and with the tail black in the middle and white! along each side; the hen differs only in being dark grey where the cock is jet black. Sometimes, people mistake a somewhat similarly coloured bird, the pied wagtail, for the magpie robin, but the latter's mercurial tail should serve to distinguish it at once. The wagtail carries its longer tail horizontally, and wags it from side to side; not so the robin—it flicks its tail upwards gaily till it almost touches the small of its back, depresses it, fans it out and shuts it tight, to reflect each exuberant mood and movement. The wagtail, too, has a pleasant, cheery whistle, but it is only that—not a rhapsodic cascade of piped song like the magpie robin's.

In summer, when it courts and breeds, you must get up really early, well before the sun, to hear the cock magpie robin's full song. Sitting atop a post or some elevated perch, with its breast puffed out and its tail flicked steeply upwards from time to time, the cock pours out its song into the cold, dawn air with a fervour that few would suspect of such a dapper-looking bird. It leaves its perch to shoot upwards to a tree-top and sing from there, and then pirouettes down to its perch with its tail spread out, in a falling spiral, and sings again. It is worth losing the sweetest hour of sleep, just before dawn, to hear the magpie robin.

The **Indian robin**, a smaller, black bird with a patch of red below the root of the tail, has a high-pitched whistle, but is no singer. However, I will not say the same of another bird that looks some-what alike, the pied bushchat; the cock is black, with a patch of white above and below the root of the tail, and a thin bar of white in each wing, of the size of the robin but stockier in build—the hen is clay-coloured. The cock has a pleasant, low whistle, but when singing, perched


MAGPIE ROBIN


INDIAN ROBIN

on a gable or post, this whistle suddenly shoots up into a high, sweet, untamed note on which the song ends.

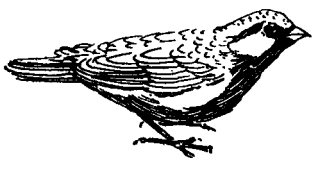
A brief song, but there is a steep, wild sweetness in it that justifies my listing it among our songbirds. For years I shared a dry, barren, weed-grown compound with a pair of bushchats, and I still remember, with pleasure, the cock's song.

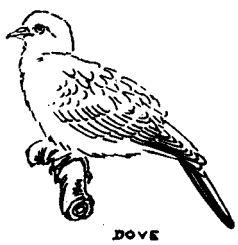
The **shama** is a forest bird, and by no means common. Most readers may not have seen it, and the few that have are likelier to have known it in a bamboo cage than in the bamboo jungles that it loves. It is the size of a magpie robin, but with a much longer tail, and a more sombre plumage. The cock is black, with a chestnut abdomen and lower breast, a patch of white above the tail, and the tail black and white; the hen is even more joberly coloured. It is a bird of the deciduous jungles, liking shade and the cover of trees and

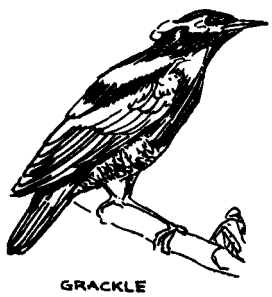

DRONGO

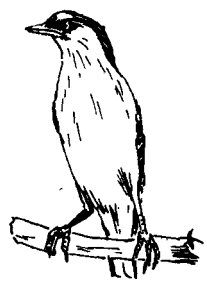
bamboos. Along with the nightingale, the cock shama is probably the most gifted among the songbirds of the world, and it is purely a question of taste which you prefer.

I have not heard the nightingale except from a record, and I know enough about bird-song, and how important the setting and hour are to its music, to realise that I have not really heard the nightingale. I have heard both the caged shama and the wild bird, and perhaps its song, as song, was equally melodious from inside the cage (I thought I sensed a great difference), but, as I said, the setting is important. Heard in the jungles, late in the evening or at dawn, the song is truly incomparable. It is not a high, clear, ardent song, but, like the nightingale's, full-throated in its ease, and wonderfully rich in cadences and tone; it is a varied song, sustained over minutes, its mellowness almost sad at times, and its welling fervour and melody can touch the human listener profoundly.


LARK


DOVE


GRACKLE


MYNA

I remember a clump of giant bamboos in the heart of a jungle where, long, long ago, I often listened to the shama, at daybreak and dusk. In the evenings, as the light failed under the criss-cross ceiling of bamboo, the song had an intense poignancy and, in passages, a sudden delight in it too, that made it unforgettable.

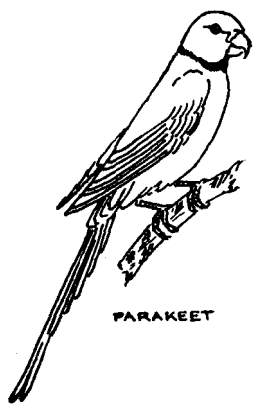
The racket-tailed **drongo** is also a forest bird, ascending the hills to a fair height. Unlike the retiring, shade-loving shama, it is a bold, confident bird, like all drongos. It is big and black and crested, and has two wire-thin streamers flowing out of its forked tail to end in black 'rackets'. It is a bird of the treetops and has a variety of harsh and pleasant calls. Early in the morning it perches on the topmost bough of some tall tree, and greets the rising sun with a high, clear paean that carries far through the forest, and which sounds, to the human listener, both joyous and ecstatic. Many of the lesser drongos indulge in a dawn chorus. Even the commonest of them, the harsh-voiced king crow, has an exuberant and refreshing vigour, heard in a chorus in the half-light before sunrise. The Vaishnavite poetess, Andal, must have felt the exhilaration in the dawn-song of the king crows, for she mentions them in a waking song. The whitebellied drongo and the grey drongo both fond of hilltop forests, have more musical voices, and a sweetly-trilled song. Whitebellied drongos begin their dawn chorus on a rather harsh, churred note, and call and answer one another, a rapid succession of similar calls from several birds in the same patch of jungle, the calls starting on a grating note and rising to a higher, sweeter note—words cannot convey the sense of sheer exhilaration that a party of these birds can inspire in the sleeper awakening.

Larks are essentially birds of open agricultural country and the scrub. Though often caged in India, all our larks are best heard in the open. There is something positively ethereal about the cascading tinkle of song that descends to the dull, heavy earth from the lark singing on high, that is not to be found in the song of any other bird. True that the calls of many other birds (even the homely sparrow's) have a certain charm when uttered in flight, and heard through the refining interspace of air, but it is not merely that which distinguishes the song of larks. There is a brittle purity about their thin, high notes that no other avian singer can achieve.

Whatever our poets may say, **mynahs, parakeets** and **doves** are not songbirds, though there is a soothing, almost soporific quality in the cooing voices of some of our doves. And some mynahs do have an authentic song, for instance, the Brahminy mynah. And although they are a tribe apart from the mynahs, the grackles or hill-mynahs, the most talented mimics and talkers among cage-birds, have marvellously rich and mellow voices. Grackles are fruit-eaters, and are wholly arboreal; they are the size of the common mynah but more heavily built, a glossy black all over with a green and purple iridescence enlivening their blackness, with orange wattles on top of their heads and orangish bills and legs. The voices of a party of these birds at some fruiting tree can endow the entire jungle for a furlong around with an unrestrained, musical gladness that nothing else can.

I have intentionally kept the **cuckoos** to the last because in no literature anywhere have any birds received the sheer volume of poetic address that our cuckoos have. Lyric poetry in all Indian languages, and even our folk-songs, are loud with references to their voices.

Our cuckoos belong to two broad divisions, the ones that build nests and rear their own young (the familiar coucal or crow-pheasant is an


PARAKEET

example of this class) and the more numerous parasitic cuckoos which have solved all domestic problems happily by foisting their eggs on other birds. It is to this second division that the cuckoos of our poetry belong.

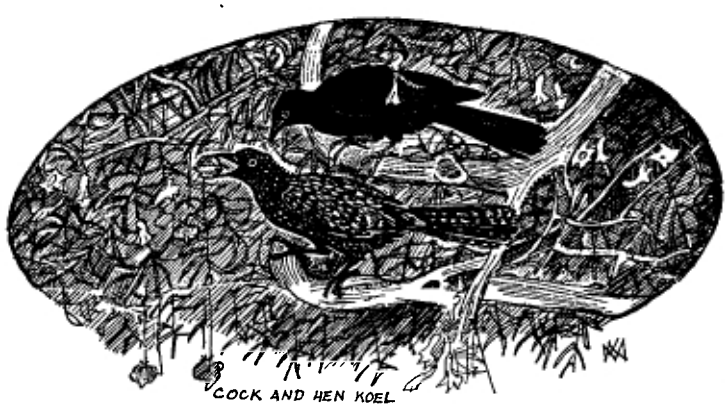
There are many parasitic cuckoos here, but I shall mention only the three celebrated in verse and countryside traditions in India —a fourth, the pied crested-cuckoo has also considerable renown in N. E. Indian folk-songs, as a harbinger of the rains. The Indian cuckoo, the hawk-cuckoo and the koel are the birds I shall detail, in that order of increasing literary importance.

The **Indian cuckoo** *(Cuculus micropterus)* belongs to the same genus as the cuckoo of English poets, but has a very different identity and voice. It is a brown-grey bird the size of a dove, inconspicuous in its looks and much given to the obscurity of tree-tops, common in wooded areas and hill jungles—it is much oftener heard than seen, unlike the ideal child, but how pleasant its repeated, musically cadenced call is, especially in a forest! The call is four-syllabled, with a descent marking the second syllable and a sharp ascent the third; it has been rendered 'bou-kathako' in Bengal, but perhaps the best rendering of the call is the well known 'broken pekoe'—in fact, to many it is the 'broken-pekoe bird'. This cuckoo calls at all hours of the day and is specially vociferous (like the hawk-cuckoo) when it is about to rain in summer. Its voice has a delightfully soothing quality.

And since love is not something soothing or sedative, it is only proper that the cuckoos of our love lyrics should be, not this pleasant-voiced bird, but the hawk-cuckoo and the koel, both of which have voices that almost communicate a fervid, mounting unrest! Europeans in India have said many unkind things about both these birds, and have found their insistent voices irritating; but is the insistent urge of love soothing? The **hawk-cuckoo** (it does look very like the shikra, the common hawk of the country) is the 'brain-fever bird' of Anglo-Indians and, much more fittingly, the 'papiha' of North Indian lyrics. It is also an arboreal bird, and common in our hill forests in summer, common and highly vocal. I remember a week in the great deciduous forests of the Anamalais, when most of the time I was alone, and most of the time, even long after dark and long before the morning, I could hear the urgent, restive crescendo of the papiha, a series of repeated queries rising to a shrill climax, to be repeated, after a momentary breathing-space, all over again. In Maharashtra they render the trisyllabic call of this bird "paos ala" (rain coming), and since the cuckoo is specially loud when the summer rain is imminent, this is a happy rendering. But the Hindi rendering is much happier, suggesting an endless, heart-broken search for a lost lover—it is "pee kahan?" (where is my lover?), and they say the bird keeps on asking "pee kahan? pee kahan? pee kahan?"; this rendering in a query is singularly apt for the call does suggest an importunate question. That time, in the Anamalais, I sometimes wished the wretched bird would find its lost love and be done with it.

Since no Indian could have missed the voice of the **koel**, the authentic Voice of Spring in our plains, there is no need to describe it. The call of the all-black cock koel, heard at all times of the day and at night, too, when there is a moon, is somewhat similar to the papiha's crescendo, though it is less shrill, and much purer and mellower in tone; and ending on a long note, and not on an abrupt short syllable like the papiha's, the koel's call does not suggest a query.

A surprising number of people do not know that the koel displays sexual dimorphism, and that the hen is not black, but a speckled dark brown and white all over. Both cock and hen have ruby-red eyes, and both feast on the poisonous drupes of the yellow oleander (the exotic *thevetia neriifolia*, so common in our gardens) with no regrets—these fruits can kill a man or a bullock! The call of the hen is a high, thin, petulant 'kik', repeated at intervals or with rapid urgency—but it is the cock's song that is celebrated. Many like the flute-like tonal richness of the cock's call, in spite of its loudness and restless repetition; and for once, I am with the majority in my preferences!



COCK AND HEN KOEL

KOEL

- *The Bird of the Poets*

M. KRISHNAN

TURNING to nature for symbol or motif, poets all over the world have had consistent preferences. The blushing rose and the perfume of the wild jasmine, for instance, have appealed to them more effectively than the Millingtonia in bloom, and they have their own birds and beasts. Naturally, the limitations of the avi-fauna of any country have shaped poetical notice of its song-birds, but there is little doubt as to which is the most sung bird in creation. No, it is not the nightingale, though Persian lyrics share philomel with English. It is not the Bulbul (which "does not sing outside the pages of *Lalah Rookh,*" as 'Eha' points out), nor the lark nor the cuckoo. Unquestionably it is the Koel : perhaps there are more references to this bird in the vast and varied literature of our country than to all other birds together ! The Koel is found all over India — in Hindi and the languages of the North, in Marathi and the tongues of middle India, in Tamil and Telugu and other southern languages, in classical poetry, in drama, in folk-songs, even in the film-songs of today; there is no bird that has achieved anything like comparable mention. Even Anglo-Indian verse is, occasionally, inspired by this loud fowl.

I think I know the secret of the Koel's appeal to the writers of lyric passages, but before divulging it I may mention the song-birds of our country, and of English literature. Here, in India, there is no lack of birds, remarkable for the purity, elan and lilt in their voices, the opulent, welling melody of their song — larks, whistling-thrushes, the magpie-robin, the Shama, and other accomplished songsters that I shall not list, for our poets have not noticed them and their names in indexical print can give no one any idea of their charm. Some of them are neither shy nor uncommon, and some (like the forest-loving Shama) are celebrated and imprisoned in cages for their melody. But the Koel is as common as the commonest of them, and in spring it is more persistently vocal than any of them. I write this from the heart of a busy city in the last days of May, and I can hear the fervid calling of Koels all around me.

The birds of English poetry are relevant because among the nightingales, larks, thrushes, blackbirds and robins of its stanzas is a cousin of the Koel, the English cuckoo (which is found elsewhere as well, in the Himalayas, for example) which was established in the literature long before the days of Logan and Wordsworth. In Elizabethan times, no doubt from its habit of foisting its progeny on to other caretakers, the cuckoo had a back-door literary connection with love :

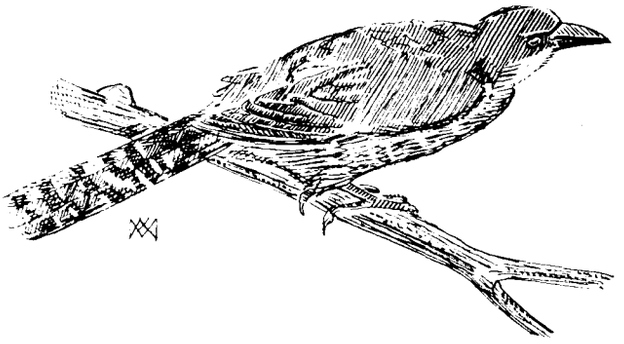
> "Cuckoo, cuckoo ! — O word of fear
> Unpleasing to a married ear !"

The other birds of English poetry (baring the cooing dove), however, do not seem to have any erotic significance whatever. In the literature of other languages many birds are associated with love (the Bulbul and parakeets, for instance) but even here the cuckoo family has a peculiar affinity to the impulse.

In our country, for example, the common hawk-cuckoo, a bird of many and onomatopeic aliases, is celebrated in erotic verse. It is the brain-fever bird of Europeans here, but to the Indian ear its plaintive, tireless voice has a tenderer connotation — it is the 'pee-kohan' and 'Pupiha' of Hindi and 'Chok-gallo' in Bengali; Sarojini Naidu has a fulsome verse on the 'Pa-pee-ha.' The bird is grey and barred, very like the Shikra (the commonest hawk of the country) in flight and sometimes in huddled repose, but its insistent, reiterated call proclaims its kinship to the Koel. Incidentally, like the Koel, it keeps calling at night as well as by day when there is a moon, and both birds have had their voices parodied in film-music. I use the word 'parodied' after due consideration, but whereas I have never heard anything that is a just rendering or echo of the Koel's voice in such music, recently I was pleasantly surprised by a song that reflects the Pupiha's call remarkably.

The Koel, of course, is supremely the bird of love and springtime. Not because of its "fluted song," as

Edwin Arnold puts it, not because of its mellifluous voice as the title 'Kokila-gana' (thoughtlessly bestowed on our sweet singers) would suggest — in fact, at no time is the versatile voice of this bird sweet or flute-like. But one has only to listen to it in sultry May to realize why the bird is so inseparably connected in our poetry with erotic sentiments.



Pupiha—the common hawk-cuckoo

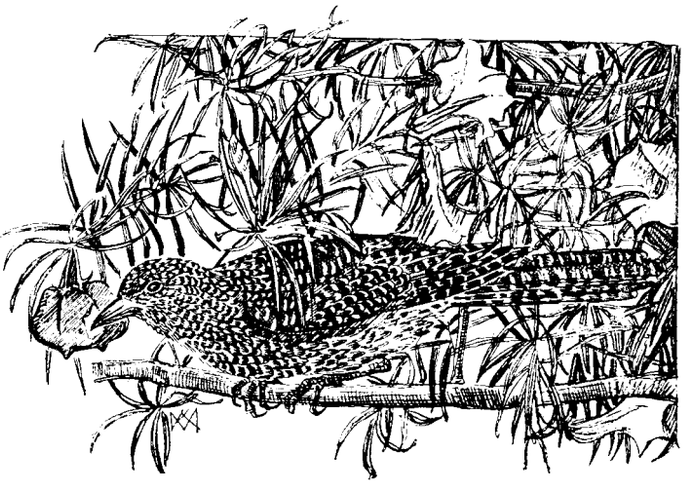
Koels are silent till March or April, but from midsummer till October they are highly vocal. They begin the spring with brief stutterings, which are really abbreviated renderings of their many call notes, but which suggest none the less unmistakably. Then the high, thin 'kik-kik, kik' of the speckled hen is heard, a call almost flat in tone but at times with a certain quickening trill in it. The impetuous, stuttering response of the all-black cock, indescribably fervid in its tone, is also heard then, and both of them can be seen flying restlessly from one tree-top to another. Soon the cock settles down to its well known crescendo, 'ku-oo, ku-oo, ku-oo, ku-oo, ku-oo,' that is sung from the cover of foliage, and which breaks abruptly at its climax, to start all over again from the lowest 'ku-oo.' A loud, whooping shout (an alarm note?), which is infrequent, and another call, described as "a torrent of 'kekaree, kekaree, kekaree,' " are also indulged in by the cock — the last is the most eager and excited love-song one can hear anywhere. It is this quality of restive desire and eagerness in the voice of both cock and hen that makes the Koel so pre-eminently the voice of urgent spring and love. Our poets have justly acclaimed the bird for this quality, but they seem to know only the fuller throated cock — apparently they are unaware of the existence of the speckled, high-voiced hen.

A bright summer moon provides sufficient light for love-struck Koels to sing by : few things convey the sense of spring unrest as expressively as their voices can. I give below my rendering of an old Tamil verse that has not missed the fevered undertones of their moonlit calling — the verse is in response to a request for a story by a lover :

"Now, when the roving moon is out, and
the soft south wind blows,
When sleep is fled;
And the calling of Koels ushers in each
watch of the night . . .
Now is no time for stories."

The romantic literature of love knows strange potions and philtres. Perhaps it is fitting that the Koel, so much the bird of love, should be addicted to poison-eating. It is the only sizeable bird that frequents the bushy *Thevetia* (exile or yellow oleander), and eats its drupes with relish. Apparently the bird is immune to the glucoside, *thevetin,* that is found in the mesocarp. Neither my own observation (which, I believe, was responsible for the "discovery" of this habit) nor that of others I have asked can provide another bird that is undoubtedly given to eating this poisonous fruit. The partiality of Koels to *Thevetia* trees seems most pronounced just before summer is due to set in. Is it possible that their poison-eating is in some way a stimulant for the ardours of spring ?

A number of birds of the cuckoo tribe have their loves unburdened with domestic consequences — they foist their eggs on to other birds. But none of them has chosen such formidable and inimical caretakers of their future as the Koel. The Koel habitually lays in the nests of the crows, the grey-necked house-crow being a more frequent choice than the all-black jungle-crow. It is remarkable how closely the love life of the Koel's follows that of their foster parents. This year, with a highly atypical summer, the crows have begun nesting rather late and the Koels have just now begun to assert themselves. This does not, however, presuppose any cunning or intelligence on the part of the Koels. The same delay in seasonal urge that retarded the crows must have touched the Koels, too.



The speckled hen in a thevetia *bush*

Crows of both kinds have an irrepressible aversion for the sight of adult Koels, and this is exploited fully in victimizing them. The nesting crows go chasing the cock Koel, that disports itself in the offing and draws them on, and while they are away the hen deposits her eggs in the nest. The eggs of Koels are

rather like the eggs of crows, but their fledgelings are very different. It is surprising, and ludicrous, that the sapient crows should be unable to distinguish the fledgeling Koels from their own progeny; but I suppose the instinctive urge to rear the hatched young that possesses them at the time blinds them. Reared in the enemy's camp, after throwing out the rightful heirs from the nest and so eliminating competition, the fledgeling Koels grow amazingly under the fond care of their foster parents. And when they are grown and can fend for themselves they fly away, to their adult life of love and deceit.