The Ranganathittoo Sanctuary

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Large Egret — note bill

SOME interesting generalisations can be made about water-birds nesting in South India, and perhaps these generalisations will answer most comprehensively questions likely to be asked about sanctuaries for these birds in the area. There seems to be much popular confusion about our water-birds, and the idea that they are migrants that have come to us from the distant, cold North is widely held.

All birds belong to the place where they are bred. Therefore our nesting water-birds belong entirely to the place where they breed, and nowhere else. They are not migrants. When not breeding, they may wander far afield in search of good feeding grounds, but that is not migration. They usually return to the place where they were bred to breed,

It is quite true that many migratory birds do come to South India (and even to Ceylon) during the cold weather, from Siberia and other places in Northern Asia and Europe, and from less remote countries. Many of these migrants are water-birds, but not all. Well known examples of such migratory water-birds and waterside-birds are most kinds of duck, geese, most terns, gulls, sandpipers, many plovers, snipe and all wagtails excepting the Pied Wagtail (which is a resident bird). Most of these migrants arrive in large flights and go about in large flights during their stay with us, and it could be that because many of our resident water-birds are also gregarious, the mistaken notion that they are migrants arose. No migrant breeds during its stay with us — in fact, these migrants arrive here soon after breeding in their northern homes.

Sometimes migratory birds come to the large sheets of water where our water-birds may nest in a mixed colony — for example, flocks of bluewinged teal are not uncommon at the Vedanthangal tank. However, they do not breed here and, moreover, it is the resident nesting birds that dominate such nesting-colonies. Our common nesting water-birds are egrets (three species), the grey heron, the pond heron or paddybird, the night heron, the cattle egret, three kinds of cormorants, the darter, the white ibis, the Indian spoonbill and the Indian openbill stork–water-hens, moorhens and coots are also not uncommon at large sheets of water and at tanks, and the little grebe (the dabchick) and jacanas are to be found even in quite small ponds. These are the birds we usually find nesting in colonies in South India. Some other resident water-birds, such as the painted stork and the grey (or spottedbilled) pelican may also nest along with them in places. Where conditions are favourable these water-birds nest in a huge mixed heronry—the Ranganathittoo and Vedanthangal sanctuaries are well known examples of such mixed heronries. But it is not always that they nest in thousands, or in such mixed colonies; much smaller nesting colonies, consisting of about two or three species breeding in two or three trees, are commoner than these large mixed heronries; at times, a water-bird may nest in a colony along with from a dozen to five dozen of its own kind— night herons, pond herons and cattle egrets frequently nest in this manner.

All over South India, it was village sentiment that protected these breeding colonies, and this is still the power that protects them in most places, though today traditional feelings are much less strong in the countryside than in the past. The Ranganathittoo and Vedanthangal sanctuaries of Mysore and Madras States, the largest mixed heronries in South India, are now recognized governmental sanctuaries, protected by official agencies. The Periyar Sanctuary of Kerala is famous not for its water-birds, but for its elephants and other forest animals, but many water-birds can be seen at this most picturesque sanctuary from March to May.

There seems to be no fixed breeding season for these water-birds in South India as a whole. In the far South, in the Thirunelveli area and in Kerala, egrets, cormorants, darters and grey herons may be seen breeding from March to May ; in Mysore they breed from July to September

Darter

and around Madras from November to January. The onset of the monsoons and the way they affect the land in each area is a vital factor in the breeding of these water-birds. A thing that is quite necessary for the breeding enterprise of water-birds is an abundance of fish, tadpoles, water-insects and the other small fry of shallow water on which they feed. Where food supply is inadequate for some reason, as because of the failure of the rains, many of them do not get into breeding condition at all. When one considers that the insatiable young of these birds normally consume much more than their own weight of food in a day (the food is supplied regurgitated by the parents) the importance of this matter will be apparent—the yickering hunger cry of the young is quite a feature of any big nesting colony of water-birds.

Water-birds usually nest in water-side trees, often in trees standing in a tank or on low ground, which, during the rains, have their bases covered by water; this way they gain a measure of insulation for nesting colonies from land-living predators. But, of course, the choice of such trees by the birds is instinctive, and not intelligent. In fact, water-birds as a class are powerfully dominated by their instincts and are not intelligent in the way the higher mammals are.

Night heron

Openbills and Smaller Egrets

The nesting colony is used year after year, and unless constantly disturbed, the same locality is used for the nesting enterprise for generations. We may now go on to an account of the Ranganathitoo Sanctuary.

This old and important sanctuary, located in nine small islets in the Kaveri near Srirangapatna, is about 11 miles from Mysore City. The approach to it is through agricultural countryside, and nothing has been done to spoil the rural charm of its setting.

The feature of the sanctuary is the utilisation of islets in the river by the water-birds to secure excellently protected breeding sites. The Kaveri is deep and flowing fast from July to September, when the birds breed. Possibly because of their rocky substratum, no large trees grow on these islets, but the birds nest in small trees (*Pongamia glabra* and *Cerbera manghas*, for instance)

and bushes, and in the brakes of screwpine (pandanus) that fringe the waterside. This crowded nesting enterprise on comparatively weak supports is a unique feature of this sanctuary.

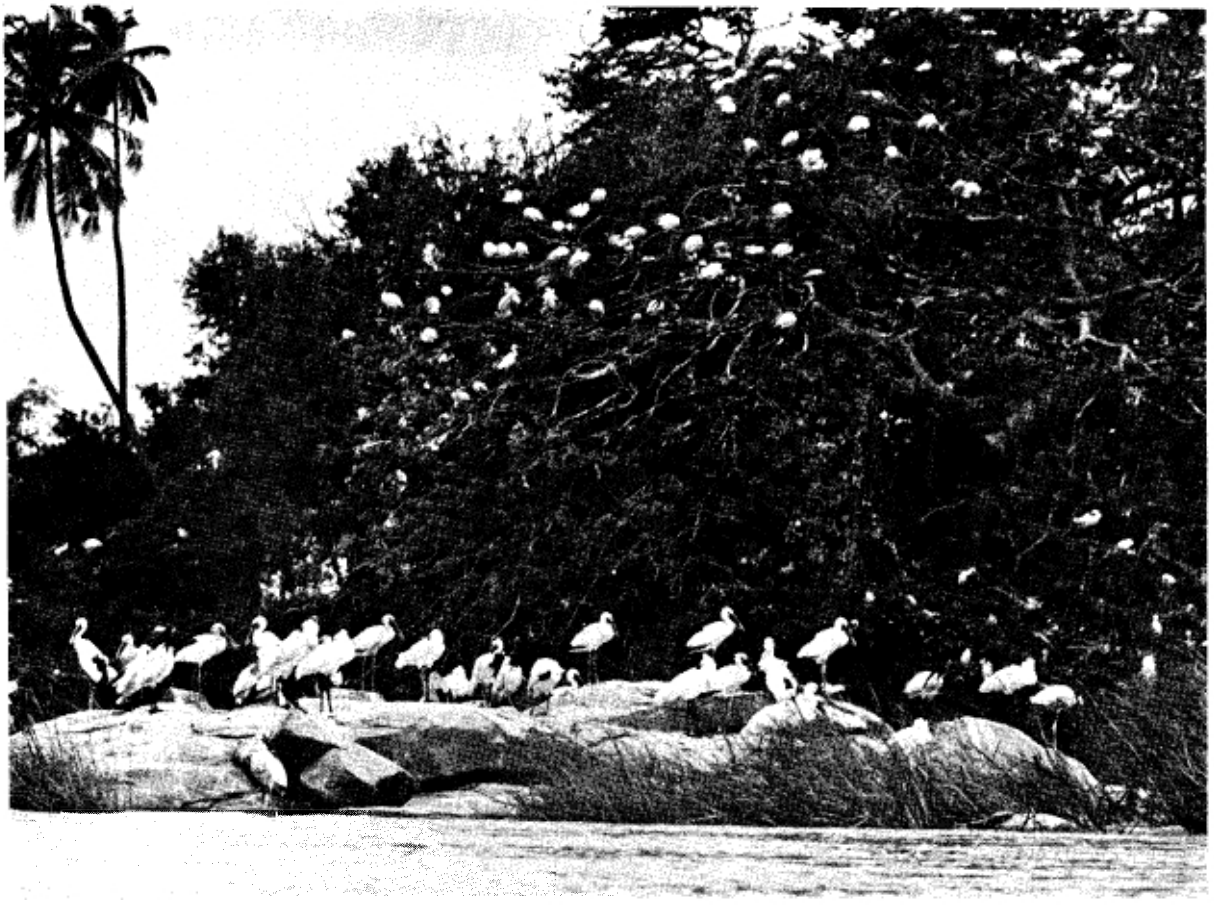
While the river serves to protect the birds, it also occasionally poses a literally overwhelming threat to their breeding enterprise and lives ; in full spate, it may drown the lesser islets, as it did last August when two islets had the vegetation on them, and the nests of course, washed away; the greatest damage caused by such flooding is not the loss of a few nests or bushes, or even trees, but the washing away of the precious topsoil from the rocky islets. Perhaps a low wall around the more vulnerable islets will serve to conserve the soil on them ; I make this suggestion without knowing the local conditions well, and it may be it is not a very practicable suggestion.

The feature of the sanctuary is its egret population ; openbills and white ibises are also very conspicuous here. There are also night herons, a few pond herons, cattle egrets, little cormorants, darters, a few spoonbills, and may be one or two other species in small numbers that I missed during my visit last August, breeding here.

At this sanctuary one can study all three species of egrets closely. There are quite a few Little Egrets, a very large number of Smaller Egrets, and a number of Large Egrets breeding here. The distinction purely by size of similar-looking birds in the field is an extremely difficult and unreliable criterion, particularly when the difference in size is not great, as it is not in our egrets. But at this sanctuary, it is easy to tell the three egrets apart even from a distance.

The Little Egret (a species with a very wide distribution) can always be spotted by the fact that just above its toes there is a splash of yellow on its black legs ; when breeding, it acquires, in addition to the mantle of fine feathers that all egrets develop at such times, a crest of two feathers placed just above the nape, right at the back of the head, a nuchal crest of two streamers, to put it in more impressive sounding language, but it is always easy to tell the Little Egret apart from other kinds if one can see its ankles.

" Openbill Rock "



It is the distinction between the Large Egret and the slightly smaller Smaller Egret that is tricky. In breeding condition, the dominantly yellow bill of the Large Egret turns black in most parts of India, and then it is not easy to distinguish it in the field from the black-billed Smaller Egret. But as in other parts of S. India, at Ranganathittoo the bill remains largely yellow even when the bird is breeding, so that it can be identified even from a distance. Incidentally, neither of these two egrets develops a nuchal crest when breeding, but both develop a nuptial finery of finely dissected, gauze-like feathers on the lower back and breast, and this is more profuse in the Smaller Egret than in the Large, or Little Egrets. Once egrets were hunted and otherwise persecuted for the sake of these beautiful plumes, but now they are protected, and luckily the fashion in ladies' hats has changed.

Why do openbills have the curious gap between their mandibles? There seems to be no good answer to this question. They feed largely on big water-snails, and at one time it was thought that the gap helped them to crush the shells in their bill, much as a nut is cracked in a nut-cracker, but that is not how they feed on snails. May be the gap does help them in capturing the snails under water.

The prehistoric-looking darter—I can never see one without thinking of the archaeopteryx! — is very much in evidence at the sanctuary and around it. It is an expert underwater fisher, perhaps even better at this than the cormorants to which it is related.

On the main islet (which is quite a sizeable one and has many trees) there are colonies of flying foxes, but the birds do not nest here.

The Kaveri, of course, adds considerably to the charm and distinctiveness of the sanctuary. The Mysore Forest Department is to be complimented on the care taken to provide adequate watching facilities to visitors without putting up anything that will detract from the wild, natural beauty of the place. There are two watch-towers discreetly placed amidst the vegetation bordering the river, from which one can watch the nesting colonies on the islets. A quaint and even fragile looking coracle (which is actually safer than a boat perhaps, because being circular it offers little resistance to the current) and a boat are provided which can be used to take one nearer the nesting colonies, but one is not taken too near, for that would panic the birds.

Openbill in flight—winging in nesting material

Smaller Egrets and one Little Egret

Crows are here in plently, as at all large mixed heronries, awaiting the opportunity to raid unguarded nests, but except when panicked the birds do not leave their nests unguarded. During my visit I noticed a party of bonnet monkeys causing considerable havoc to a nesting colony, spilling more eggs than they ate (these monkeys eat eggs all right, when they can), and frightening the nesting birds and so causing them to tumble the eggs out of their nests in their hurry to fly away. I am very sure that bonnet monkeys are not among the natural predators that nesting water-birds have to contend with, and while it is poor wildlife protection to attempt to limit natural

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