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Vedanthangal

Just 80 kilometres (50 miles) from the coastal city of Madras lies Vedanthangal, one of India's oldest wild life sanctuaries. No wonder, it is a sanctuary for water-birds.

For centuries, rural sentiment in India has protected the nesting colonies of water-birds at village tanks and outlying waters, realising how vulnerable the birds are during their arduous, long-drawn breeding enterprise. Year after year, soon after the first heavy rains, the water-birds arrive in large flights from all around to the same nesting trees, the boles of which are now practically submerged and insulated by water. They begin to nest and breed in a congested mixed heronry, and raise two or three successive broods over a period of three months. During this period they are exposed to many dangers, chief among them being predation by man ; and realising this, the villagers have zealously pro-

tected the nesting colonies near their habitations.

Some of these old nesting sites are now gone, destroyed in the course of human occupation of the plains. Madras 28, a prosperous, crowded extension of that city now stands where, in the days of my boyhood, stood the nesting trees of egrets and night-herons. Some other colonies survive, having been recognised by the Government as water-bird sanctuaries, but none have as long and as fully documented a history as Vedanthangal.

In the last year of the 18th century the villagers of Vedanthangal approached Lionel Place, the first Collector of the Ching-

leput district appointed by the East India Company, and quite a remarkable man by all accounts. They told him that for generations the inhabitant had strictly protected the water-birds breeding in crowded thousands in the heart of their village tank, in a grove of "kadappai" trees (Barringtonia Acutangula), but that recently some Europeans had taken to shooting them. Place gave them a "Cowle" (a document of authority) empowering them to protect the birds against all comers, European or otherwise. In 1925, the Government of Madras declared Vedanthangal a water-bird sanctuary and took over the responsibility of official protection. However, it remained little known, even in nearby Chingleput. Twenty years ago the Government asked me to resurvey the sanctuary and suggest means for its conservation. Today thousands of visitors are attracted to its bund (raised embankment) during the nesting season, and there is a regular bus service from Madras to Vedanthangal during the cold weather.

Although many of the birds breeding in sanctuaries are of the same kinds (cormorants, darters, egrets, spoonbills and storks, are common to most of them) each water-bird sanctuary in the country has its own quiddity, peculiar setting and attractiveness. For instance, Ranganathitoo near Mysore, the smallest of them, is every bit as captivating as, and yet utterly different

from the vast spectacular pageant of Keoladeo Ghana in Bharatpur, the largest of them all. Vedanthangal too, has its own distinctive character and charm. Here the nesting trees are in the middle of the broad tank which dries up as the season progresses, so that the home-water right beneath the trees provides a rich feeding ground to the new generations of water-birds.

A FLIGHT OF SHAG RETURNING HOME





A singular feature at Vedanthangal is that visitors are not allowed to go close to the nesting colony: they can, however, have a good look at its teeming inhabitants from the bund which offers the visitors shade and an elevated view-point. The birds, in constant search of food, set out in crowded flights and cross and recross the bund all day, often flying quite low, thus allowing visitors a close look at them on the wing. Incidentally, it is best to visit Vedanthangal in the afternoon—the nesting colony being roughly to the east of the bund, the sun hits one's face in the morning.

Before briefly listing the main species to be seen at Vedanthangal, it may be said that all the birds nesting here are indigenous, and belong to Vedanthangal; the home of any bird being where it breeds and is bred. Migratory water-birds and waterside birds arriving during the cold weather, do not breed during their stay with us—in fact, they are through with breeding in their cold northern homes before they start on their migration. Even small spreads of shallow water attract these migrants, and quite a few come to the Vedanthangal tank: other water-birds, such as moorhens, coots and blackwinged stilts, may also be seen here.

These are the main breeding birds of Vedanthangal : cormorants of all 3 kinds. Only a few pairs of Large Cormorants breed here, and they do not exhibit the white, oval patches on the flanks (typical of them elsewhere in India) : however, their larger size, the yellow skin above the throat, and the filamentous white feathers on the

head, during the beeding season, distinguish them from the shag and the Little Cormorant. Both the latter are found in numbers here, and fly out to the great Madurantakam Lake past the bund in swift, crowded flocks.

The darter or snake-bird : one sees at once why it is called the 'snake-bird' when it is seen swimming with its body submerged and only the head and neck showing above the water.

The Grey Heron is the avian feature at Vedanthangal. More of them are seen here than anywhere else in the peninsular. During the season, here at Vedanthangal, the skin on the legs of these birds turns a bright, salmon pink—a local peculiarity ! Pond Herons (paddy birds) and quite a large number of Night Herons are features of the sanctuary.

Cattle Egrets are to be seen commonly in the rice fields immediately beyond the bund: they breed late in the season.

The Large, the Median and the Little Egret all breed here. Here, the bill of the Large Egret retains its yellow tip even when breeding. Egrets are among the most graceful of all birds on the wing.

Spoonbills and White Ibises, both rather thickset white birds with unmistakable bills (straight and spatulate in the spoonbill, which has a tuft of feathers at the back of its head while breeding—sickle-shaped and black in the White Ibis, which has a black head and neck) and often seen in sizable flights : the spoonbills soar on occasions.

The only stork here is the Openbill, a grey bird with black pinions. It is the size of a heron and has a gap between its mandibles, the function of which is not known—this gap certainly does not as it is often alleged to do, serve to crack open the large snails to which the Openbill, the smallest of Indian storks, is partial. The return flights of the Openbills to the nesting colony are quite a feature of Vedanthangal—the birds fly in at a fair height, and their

acrobatic descent to the treetops is spectacular. Openbills soar in company on sunny days.

The nesting season at Vedanthangal is somewhat later than elsewhere in South India. The birds arrive at the tank in September and in October: the breeding enterprise is in full swing during November and December, and by February the parent birds and the young they have bred (now grown up—young water-birds grow almost visibly!) have left for their feeding grounds, some of which may be a hundred miles away or further.

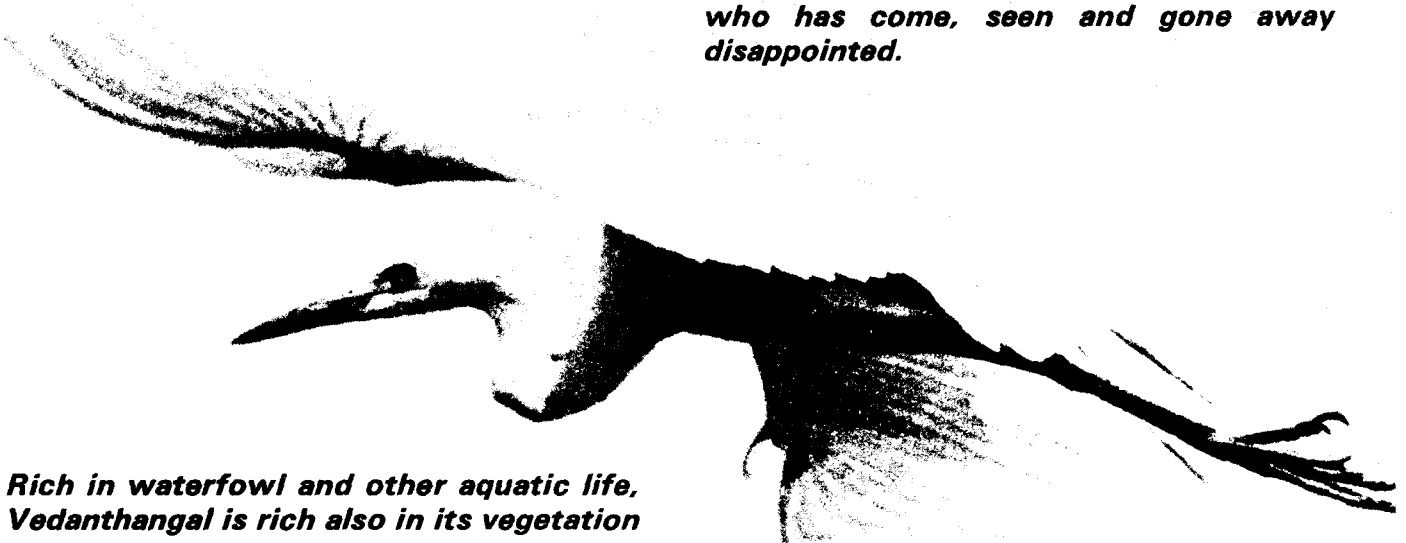
learns to identify the birds by their size, colour and style of flight. The northern and central parts of the bund are best for watching flights. And the bund itself abounds in bird life—mynahs, bulbuls, hoopoes and cuckoos flash and call in every tree . . .

This, then is Vedanthangal, a birdwatcher's paradise. But even for those who know very little about birds, a trip to the sanctuary becomes a fascinating experience. To stand on the bund, some evening before sunset, watching the spectacular homecoming flight of thousands of egrets, herons and ibises is to experience a rare kind of thrill, a thrill not easily matched. Rare, too, is the visitor to Vedanthangal who has come, seen and gone away disappointed.

Rich in waterfowl and other aquatic life, Vedanthangal is rich also in its vegetation which includes rattah cane. The "kadappai" trees, probably four centuries old, have housed a hundred generations of birds.

*Though some of these trees are dying, they are being replanted. And while we're on the subject of vegetation, the unwary naturalist would be well-warned not to investigate the ground vegetation on the sides of the bund too closely: there is a kind of stinging nettle here, a species of *tragia* to which some people can be allergic.*

Perhaps the best time to visit the sanctuary is from 3 to 4 o'clock in the afternoon till sunset. Take along a pair of binoculars and ensconce yourself in the bund. Even without binoculars, though, one soon



EGRET ON THE WING