

## Essay



Pied kingfisher

## Gujarat Natural Life Story Vol. 2: Birds

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White-throated kingfisher

### 1. Introduction

In the previous volume, I introduced animals seen in Vadodara City, Gujarat and the surrounding area in west India, where KYB-Conmat Pvt. Ltd. is located. In this volume, I would like to introduce some of about 90 species of birds I saw in the area. Before that, I would like to write about two events that occurred after submitting the article on animals.

The first one occurred while I was in a company-owned car on a national road. A herd of cows was moving along the road. Suddenly, one of them made a dash for me. Driver hit the brakes, but it was too late, and the car crashed into the cow. The bonnet was dented. Fortunately, both the driver and I weren't injured and the cow also seemed all right as it stood up immediately. I have had a few car and minor motorcycle accidents in the past three years, but this was the first experience in India.

The second one was witnessing a wild cat, the "Caracal," which can jump more than two meters into the air, during a bird-watching trip in the suburbs of Ahmedabad. And I could see "Nilgai" near Vadodara (Photo 1).



Photo 1 Caracal and nilgai

### 2. Birds

#### 2.1 Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*)

The coppersmith barbet is a short, stocky bird, about the size of a sparrow, with a crimson forehead and breast. Its body is colorful and bright. The bird is known for its persistent and metronomic "tuk tuk tuk" call that has been likened to a coppersmith striking metal with a hammer.

I am most familiar with this bird among many birds. At dawn, a coppersmith barbet used to peck at the glass window of my bedroom. It might have been alarmed at the reflection of itself in the glass and tried to attack it. It put on a mischievous face when it sat on the windowsill and peeked at me, but made a surprisingly stern face when it gave a big yawn.



Photo 2 Coppersmith barbet giving a big yawn



Photo 3 Coppersmith barbet pecking at the glass

I enjoyed the bird's visit every day between February and August. Then it only came after longer intervals. Although I moaned about its noise and droppings, I found myself waiting for the next visit.

One Sunday evening, I heard a loud crash from my bedroom. I found the coppersmith lying on the balcony, bleeding from the mouth and anus. Its mouth was open and twitching its stomach. Apparently, it had smashed into the glass, and looked in pain (Photo 4).

I was afraid that it was going to die. Twenty minutes later, however, it got up, and after another ten minutes or so flew off. The coppersmith hasn't come back since. I hope it got better and is still alive.



**Photo 4** Breathless coppersmith barbet

One morning at the end of October, when the sky was blue and the temperature was nice and cool, I heard repeated hiccups. It was a young bird on an electric wire trying to chatter, struggling to make the right sound. I wished the bird that was unconscious on my balcony had come back.

**2.2 Indian Silverbill (Euodice malabarica)**

This bird was born on the balcony of my colleague who lived downstairs. There was an awning on his balcony and a nest was made on the loose part where the baby birds hatched. These baby birds visited my room upstairs. They look simple, but are adorable.



**Photo 5** Baby birds sitting on the sash of a glass window

**2.3 Red-vented bulbul (Pycnonotus cafer)**

This type of bird can often be seen in the city center, suburbs, and fields. It has a black head and the crest looks like a hood. The name is derived from the red

undertail covert. While Japanese bulbuls chatter cheerfully and loudly, these bulbuls make charming sounds at dawn.



**Photo 6** Happy red-vented bulbul couple

**2.4 House crow (Corvus splendens)**

In India, there are many small house crows with gray necks and chests. Black crows can also be seen. They are probably jungle crows and are smaller than Japanese ones. They are similar to Japanese jungle crows in that they have a menacing look when their haws are closed and often bother black kites and other birds.



**Photo 7** House crows



**Photo 8** House crows (left) bothering an Indian pond heron (right)

### 2.5 Jungle babbler (*Turdoides striata*)

The jungle babbler is a member of the family Leiothrichidae. It is a domesticated bird and the number is increasing in Japan. They live in flocks and have no regard for others, making loud noises. They are not scared of people. Their skipping gives me the impression of them being lightweight, while their eyes are dreadful. I have an antipathy against this bird as it drives other birds out.



**Photo 9** Jungle babblers chattering loudly in a flock

### 2.6 Indian pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*)

Many types of herons can be seen in Japan, except Indian pond heron. They look plain and undistinguishable from the ground. When they are flying in the sky, their white wings are noticeable.



**Photo 10** Indian pond heron flying through the air

### 2.7 Red avadavat (*Amandava amandava*)

Ajwa Lake in Vadodara is a large reservoir located 25 km east of the town. It is the water source of the Vishwamitri River that runs through the town and is where crocodiles live. Some also live in the lake. There is a marsh filled with cattail and pond lily in the south of the lake. Crocodiles may well live here. Tentatively, I tried to go to the bank of the canal. Flocks of weaverbirds and purple swamphens flew from the grass. Herons were watching their prey here and there. Swamphens were in the distance. On the further side, people were catching something from a small raft.

On the grass by the canal, I saw a deep red bird with white spots. It was the first time to see this species. It was elegant, pretty and beautiful. It looked to have the breeding plumage of male birds. A female bird nearby

was grayish green and brown. Part of its feathers was red. This also looked elegant. As soon as I came home, I looked it up in an encyclopedia. It was a red avadavat. They are sold in bird shops in Japan. I didn't know this, but I vaguely remember that an album by Matsutoya Yumi had the same name.

This bird is native to India and other countries, and it was imported to Japan as a pet during the Edo Period. The binomial name is *Amandava*, which comes from the city of Ahmedabad from where this species was exported. The city is located about 100 km northwest of Vadodara and is the largest city in Gujarat. I am pleased that I could see this bird in a place I am familiar with. I wonder how this bird traveled over 6,000 km to Japan in the 18th century - by sea or on the back of camels by land. They might even have evolved. They must have a DNA connection with the red avadavat I saw today.



**Photo 11** Red avadavat having a rest

### 2.8 Common hoopoe (*Upupa epops*)

Hoopoes can only be seen on rare occasions in Japan. If a hoopoe is found, the event is covered by the media. Its body is a beautiful light brown and the wings and lower body have black and white stripes. Its long beak and crown are eye-catching. Japanese name "Yatsugashira (means eight heads)" derives from occasionally standing its crests like unfolding a fan.

The Showa Emperor saw the bird when he was digging taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) in the field in the Imperial Palace. He asked the chamberlain to bring binoculars. The chamberlain didn't know why, and asked the Emperor "Why do you need binoculars to dig taro?" However, this is what you would expect of the Emperor as he was a biologist. It is unknown whether the name of taro that he was digging was "Yatugashira" (same as the Japanese name of common hoopoe). For the imperial family, the inlay of a hoopoe was used on some of the Shosoin Gyobutsu (items belonging to the Imperial family) biwas (lutes).

I was looking forward to seeing hoopoes as their habitat is spread throughout India. I could see them near Vadhavana Lake, a large agricultural reservoir located about 40 km southeast of Vadodara and 20 km east of KCPL. This is my favorite place. In winter, vast numbers of geese and ducks migrate here.

It was pecking the ground for worms with its long beak in the grass on the sloped bank of the pond. It is not so cautious but it won't open its crown so easily. Although it opens the crown for a brief second when it landed, it is difficult to capture the moment in a photo.



**Photo 12** Hoopoe looking for worms in the ground

### 2.9 Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*)

I saw this bird in the fields around Vadhavana Lake. Once you see its bright blue wings and purple seen through the light brown neck feathers, you will fall in love with its beauty. It watches the ground while sitting on a favorite branch and will fly away when it finds a worm. It is not easily alarmed and often swoops down in front of you. I could not focus on it as it was too close. I came here again and again to find this bird and the hoopoe.



**Photo 13** Indian roller flying through the air

### 2.10 Feral pigeon (*Columba livia domestica*)

You cannot fail to see these pigeons in Vadodara. They are the same species as the pigeons in Ueno Park. They flock on roofs, handrails and electric wires. In the street, they cluster around beans people bought from stalls. On the other hand, some are unscrupulous and go for beans directly from stalls. When I leave my windows open, they come inside the room and sit on the air conditioning unit or on a wing of the ceiling fan. When I send them away, they fly to the neighborhood roof. I get offended when they act as if they know me. When black kites

appear in the air, the pigeons fly away. Although being scavengers, black kites are raptors. The pigeons need to escape.



**Photo 14** Feral pigeons sitting on beans in a stall.

### 2.11 Spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*)

Spotted doves and laughing doves are correspondent to turtle doves in Japan. Spotted doves have spots like deer on the neck instead of the black-and-white spots of turtle doves. Laughing doves are smaller and have darker brown bodies. Unlike feral pigeons, they don't have the cheek to come inside the room, and they have a soft colored body and sound.



**Photo 15** Spotted dove resting on a branch of a drumstick tree

### 2.12 Asian koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*)

The male koel is black and about the size of a cuckoo. It has a grayish white beak and red eyes. The female koel has black and white spots all over her body. They make various sounds including a discouraging, mournful one at dawn, but my householder disliked its tone. They are the same species as cuckoos and are also brood-parasitic. Spotted doves were sitting on their eggs in an Ashoka bush. When the parent birds went away for a minute, a female koel flew in the nest. After a few dozen seconds, it flew away holding an egg in its beak. It laid an egg quickly and then took away a pigeon egg for fixing the original number of them in the nest.



**Photo 16** Koel spitting out a large seed

**2.13 Black-headed ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), red-naped ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*), glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*)**

The ibis seen in Japan is the *Nipponia nippon*. After they went extinct in the wild in Sado, ibis from China were bred artificially. Naturally bred ibis were seen this year. In Japan, they inhabited across the country until the 19th century. The same species is often seen in India now.



**Photo 17** Black-headed ibis (left) and red-naped ibis (middle, right)



**Photo 18** Flock of glossy ibises

The black-headed ibis— its Japanese name “Kurotoki” means “black ibis,” its head is black, whereas the body is white; the red-naped ibis— its Japanese name “Aka-ashitoki” means red-legs ibis, the whole body is black, red at back of the head and reddish legs; and the glossy

ibis— its Japanese name “buronzu-toki” means bronze ibis, whole of the body is blackish brown with a metal-like gloss. Their English names are simple but the Japanese names can cause misunderstandings. Many glossy ibis forage in flocks in the fields in winter. When they take to the air, it is a magnificent view.

**2.14 Greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)**

Although you might associate flamingos with Africa or tropical regions, they make their habitat in west India. I could see greater flamingos in the Thol Lake Bird Sanctuary located about 20 km west of Ahmedabad. The rose pink in their bodies is beautiful. They forage putting their head in water for a long time. I wonder if blood gets stuck in their heads.



**Photo 19** Greater flamingos (left) and Ruddy shelducks

**2.15 Demoiselle Crane (*Grus virgo*)**

The sarus crane (*Grus antigone*), a resident bird, the common crane (*Grus grus*), a migrant bird, and the demoiselle crane (*Anthropoides virgo*) could be seen in India.

In the middle of March, a large flock of demoiselle cranes took to the air at the same time near Nalsalovar Lake, a registered wetland under the Ramsar Convention, located about 100 km northwest of Vadodara. They caught an updraft and flew up in a spiral. After a few minutes, they headed north in a complicated v-shaped formation. They were going over the Himalayas toward Tibet and Mongolia. The view was magnificent and filled my heart with joy.



**Photo 20** Demoiselle cranes going up in a spiral

### 2.16 Indian peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*)

The national bird of India is the Indian peafowl. In Japan, they are kept in zoos and parks, but in India, they can often be seen in fields, parks and golf courses. There are domestic peafowls in cages in zoos and wild peacocks on the grass outside Sayaji Baug Park. Male peacocks walk while swaying their beautiful tail feathers that look heavy. Many of them rest in trees.

After the breeding season, the tail feathers molt, and it temporarily looks embarrassing for the birds without tail feathers. I often see vendors selling bunches of feathers throughout the town. They must have collected the feathers that had fallen off.



**Photo 21** Indian peafowl opening feathers

### 3. In Closing

As is usual, I have many stories mingled with feelings of joy and sorrow during my work abroad. I returned to Japan on May 4, 2016, ending my 3-year expatriate life. It was a pity that I could only observe birds in my 58 days of annual holiday, Sundays, a few public holidays, and short times in the mornings and evenings, but it was a highlight of my expatriate life.

This time, I felt that it was easy to gather information thanks to the Internet. I could immediately compare English and Japanese names. It was greater benefits of IT than 10 years ago. However, the quotes can be quoted, and original sources can be the same, and there could be many obvious mistakes. A good judge of users is required. Although it might sound paradoxical, even though I included photos, I recommend to go and see these birds – the impression is incomparable, as in the proverb “seeing is believing.”

I believe I took great care in writing the names of the birds; however, you may see some errors and misunderstandings. Your corrections are appreciated.

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