Birds in your own Backyard

Posted on

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The magpie robin is generally considered a bird of ill-omen-and all because this unfortunate bird is dressed in black and white.

This is just one instance of the uncaring attitude that me majority of city dwellers have to the many beautiful and interesting birds that frequent their gardens. So the magpie robin, one of our sweetest songsters, is is regarded with foreboding rather

man watched and cherished and listened to with joy.

The tops of trees and telegraph poles have given way to television antennae as favourite perches for these entrancing little songbirds, and there is no pleasanter awakening from a deep and dreamless sleep than to me dear, dulcet trilling of the magpie robin. Glossy blue-black and white plumage, constantly moving tail and perky personality make it one of the most noticeable birds in urban gardens.

One of the littlest feathered creatures in your garden, the tailor-bird, is also one of the noisiest. It is difficult to understand how such a loud call can emit from such a tiny bird. This diminutive busybody is truly ubiquitous and can be found almost everywhere in the island. A garden with a plentiful sprinkling of hedges and bushes is its preferred habitat. Ceaselessly active, it hops in and out of them in relentless pursuit of the small insects that are its food. All the while it maintains contact with an equally active mate by piercing “twik-twiks” and “twikes” or ”tiwer -tiwer - tiwers”.

The tailor-bird breeds throughout the year, but mostly between February and May. If you are fortunate enough to spot one building a nest, just freeze … and watch! You will soon begin to understand why it is so aptly named. The sharply pointed beak, however, is used more like a cobbler’s awl than a tailor’s needle. The material is usually a e leaf or two or three smaller ones, the edges of which are sewn together to form a pocket for the nest. It begins by punching holes near the edges of the leaves and then proceeds to push strands of cottonlike fluff through the opposing holes, loosely pulling the edges of the leaf or leaves together. The resultant pocket is then packed with available bits of cotton, fluff and fibre to complete the nest. At this time your coconut fibre doormat or sunning cotton vest can be irresistible attractions . In most gardens, the villain of the piece is the much-abused coucal, often mistakenly dubbed jungle crow. It derives its furtive reputation a much from its sinister appearance as from its predatory habits, and robbing of little birds’ nests of their eggs and offspring is one of its less charming pursuits. A baleful red eye does not do much to improve the malevolent image. Still, there is a lot to be said in its favour. The coucal’s menu also includes lizards, snakes, frogs, snails, mice and a variety of not so friendly insects and their larvae. So, welcome the common coucal to your garden, as a pest controller extraordinary.

Coucals forage alone, but a pair of them keeps in constant touch by what G. M. Henry described as “one of the best-known bird sounds in ·ceylon.” However, whilst acknowledging its familiarity, one wonders how many people are able to place it as

the call of the coucal. The bird is a clever ventriloquist and its “oop-oop-oop” call to its mate rarely gives its position away to a human observer. The call is deep, clear and resonant-always seeming to come from far away. Outside my window, in Havelock Town, is an old mango tree, which still bears a petrified branch pockmarked with holes made by nesting woodpeckers. What an outstandingly beautiful bird is the red-backed woodpecker, with its bright vermillion back and jaunty red crest. Horizontal white bands border the eyes and continue to the back of the head or nape. The rest of the head, breast and underparts are speckled black and white. A stiff-necked bird is the woodpecker, like a puppet on a string-moving in jerks up or down vertical tree trunks-or, perhaps, a man on a coconut tree. Short legs and zygodactyle feet with strong, sharp, curved claws are artfully designed to suit this bird’s life-style, climbing up and down tree trunks, head upright, and feeding off the ants and other crawling insects that often infest them. Watch a woodpecker wade into a marauding army of large red ants (the vicious, biting kind) and dispose of them with quick stabs from its pointed beak. I hate ants and I must confess to being morbidly fascinated by the spectacle of their rapid and ruthlessly efficient elimination. I love woodpeckers and can spend hours watching them. The most gregarious of garden birds, often ignored because of its insipid colouring, is the babbler. Henry’s description is particularly apposite: “frumpish” and “curiously anaemic”. Do fmd the time to observe them, however. Their antics are worth watching. Common babblers travel in troops, more often than not in groups of seven, which gives them their alliterative cognomen: “Seven Sisters”. If you have the time and, of course, the inclination to watch a flock of these nondescript-looking birds in your garden, you will find it most rewarding. Give ear to their conversation-they chatter incessantly-and if you should find Seven Sisters all together on some convenient branch, do not fail to watch as you will soon be treated to an entertaining spectacle. Llke a bunch of old ladies at a church picnic, puffing up their drab finery, they flutter their wings and jerk their tails, trilling and squeaking and gossiping all the while. A perky, cheeky little bird is the bulbul. The redrented variety is the type you will most often come across in a city garden. His jaunty crest and bright red under-tail coverts are easily spotted. Although the bulbul’s calls, according to Henry, suggest a partiality for ginger beer and sweet potatoes, its favourite diet consists of berries (“lantana” for preference), insects and grubs. Also a prolific bird, the bulbul generally mates between March and May, and again in August/September. Quite often at other times in between, too! And, if you are a lucky voyeur, you may be witness to a pair of red-rented bulbuls in courtship. The male blows himself up by puffing out its feathers and fanning out his piece de resistance, the vermillion undertail. The female’s response is a lowering of her crest

and a coy, submissive depression of her headquivering excitedly and chirping inanities. It is a good thing that bulbuls are so prolific, otherwise they might have become an endangered species since they do not show much sense in the selection of their nesting sites, which are, consequently, frequently ravaged by marauding coucals, crows and the neighbour’s cat.

So you see, there is much more to a city garden than flowers, lawns and trees. Spare a thought for the birds. Encourage their presence by putting in a few fruit trees like the guava, mulberry and jam fruit. Also, please, a lantana bush or two, for the bulbuls.

