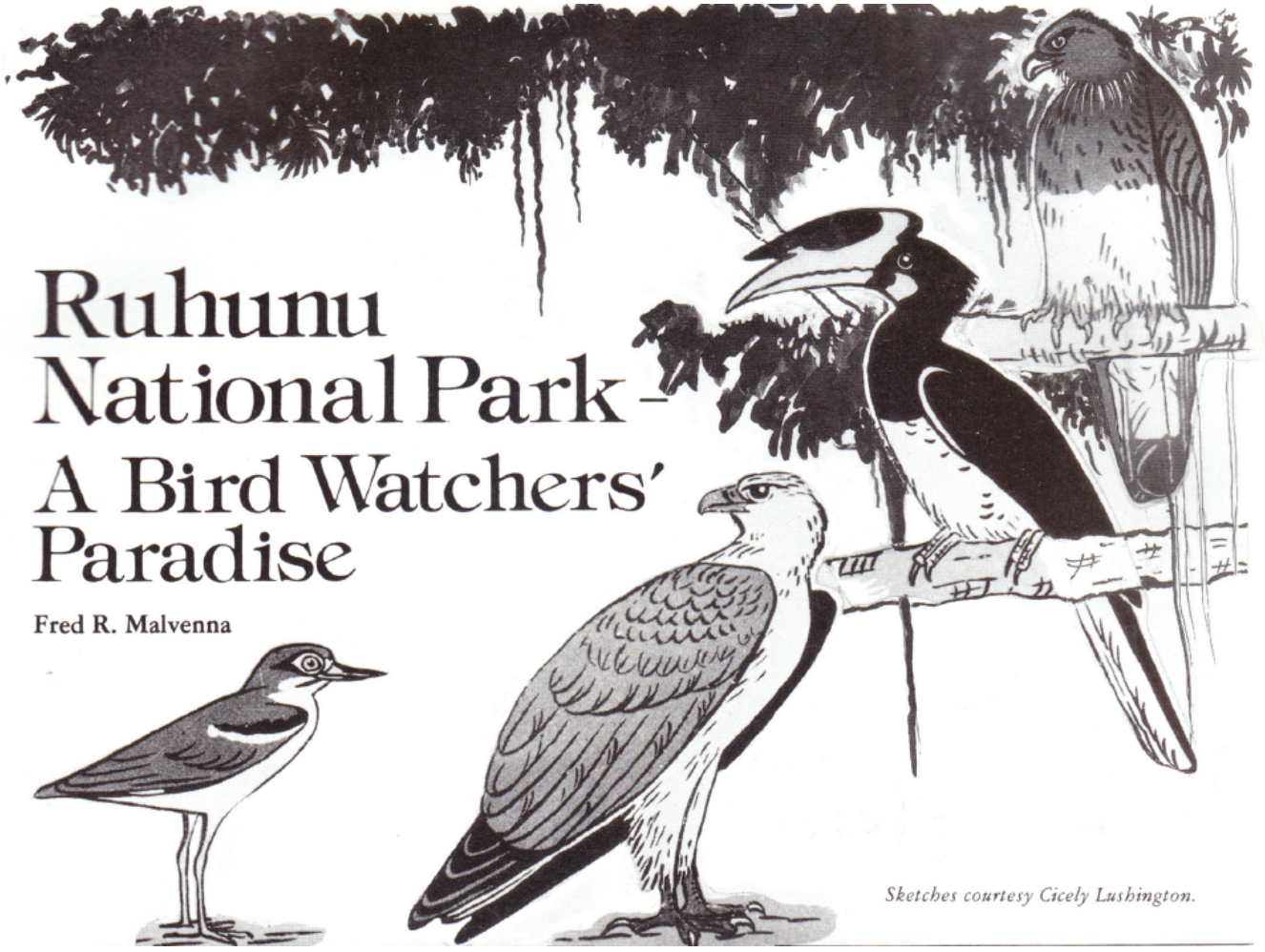
Ruhunu National Park: A Bird Watchers’ Paradise

Posted on

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Watching Birds : The winged ones can be a most interesting and time absorbing past time for anyone who cares to spend a few days in the Ruhunu National Park better known as Yala. Of the 251 or more species of resident birds; amongst them 21 endemic varieties and 81 sub endemic species one is able to observe most of these during the months of October – April which is the breeding season for most of

the resident birds in Sri Lanka. Lots of patience, a quiet and undisturbed environment and a pair of binoculars could reward the eager bird watcher with rich dividends. In a period of three days over seventy five species of birds have been observed by me in and around the precincts of the Yala Park bungalow. Heralding the day the pea-fowls fly down from their roost up in the surrounding tall trees, while the jungle fowls walk out into the open for a little sunshine. The black crow is the earliest visitor to the bungalow.

A black robin and a Magpie Robin soon join the forage near the kitchen quarters. Then, a pair of Common Babblers-white throated and brown capped hopping in the undergrowth of the lush jungle around. A family of lora fly onto the tree-tops nearby while a pair of Jerdon's Chloropsis are busy building their nest on a tree by the nearby river, the Menik Ganga. Red vented, black capped and white capped Bulbuls were everywhere feeding on berries and insects that are plentiful. Flying overhead were formations of Cormorants, groups of Pelicans, dozens of Painted Stork, Spoonbills, Ibis and Whistling Teal all wending their way to nearby lagoons and tanks for their daily grub.

Through the cacophony of hundreds of birds come the high pitched music of the songbird of Sri Lanka. The Shama whose sweet call has a variety of notes that keeps the listener spellbound. larger than a Magpie Robin but similar in appearance these rather shy birds confine themselves to the bushes and are difficult to observe. The call is answered by another in the distance and the duet continues for over fifteen minutes while a Male Paradise Flycatcher in the 'white phase' accompanied by a Brown Juvenile flirted amongst the foliage. On the open glade Munias are busy collecting dry grass to build their nests with, as Mynahs look for grasshoppers. This disturbs a Jack Snipe which takes wing with a sharp "Chirp".

On the Palu (Mimusops hexandra) tree nearby are Malabar Pied Hornbills, Imperial Pigeons, flocks of Orange Breasted Green Pigeons, Brown Headed and Crimson Breasted Barbets, Rose Ringed Parakeets and Lorikeets all busy gobbling the last of the ripe Palu fruits that still remain at the end of the season. A pair of blue faced Malkoha join the party as a noisy bunch of Alexandrine Parakeets take wing to some far away place. The quiet of the morning is disturbed by the sudden shrill alarm call of several birds which denotes a warning of the peril that hovers overhead in the form of a Grey Headed Eagle that is looking for prey. Soon it is joined by a Brahminy Kite and a Pied Harrier as they start circling over the open glade. A dive into the grass, a shriek and the eagle flies away with a young Bustard Quail in its clutches.

As midday approaches, the sun shines bright and hot, and most birds take cover under the green foliage. On the fringe of a nearby pond are Red Wattled and Yell ow Wattled Lapwing, some standing on one leg while others spurt around looking for grub. The sudden appearance of a wandering iguana changes the scene. One lapwing seems to be in some trouble – one wing hangs down as if broken and the bird falls on a side, gets up and limps in front of the iguana which gets interested in the easy prey.

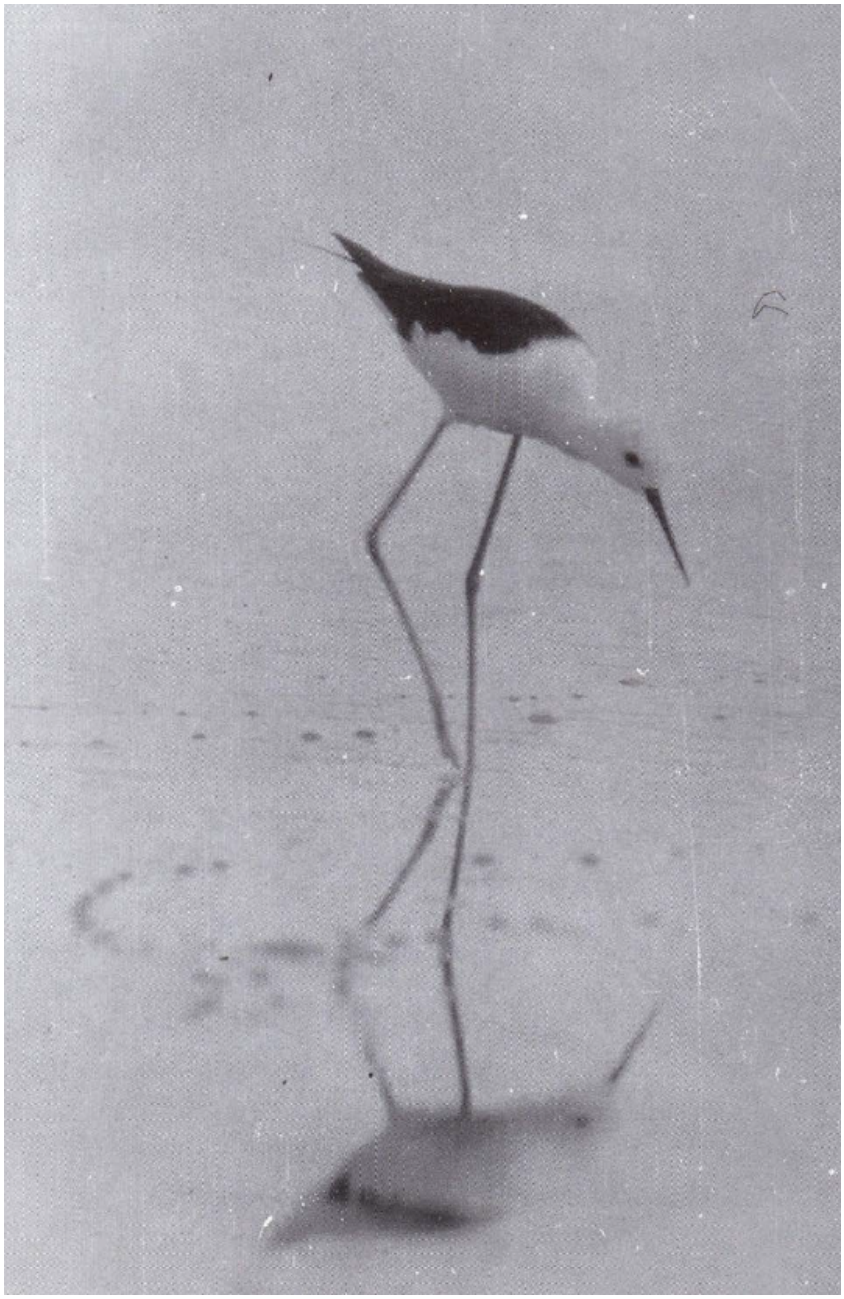
As the iguana approaches the lapwing it limps away keeping a safe distance till the iguana gives up the hopeless chase. Another episode of the jungle law of survival is enacted as the lapwing lures away the would be predator from her clutch of eggs that lay exposed on the dry grass. In th\: water are a pair of Black Winged Stilts with their long pink legs and yellow beaks, pacing hither and thither looking for snails and other Crustaceans to feed on. A brace of Whistling Teal sit quietly on the waters edge as dozens of sandpipers make endless runs around the pond. Little Terns dart in and out of the water as a Pied Kingfisher homes in on a hapless fish that broke to the surface. A White-Breasted Kingfisher and a Stork Billed one watches with envy from a dry branch nearby.

Solitary thorny bushes along the jeep track arc: popular abodes of bee-eaters; the Ceylon Bee-Eater – Chestnut headed – which are found in small companies and the Blue tailed ones which appear as migrants. They continue to dart around looking for flying insects while some enjoy sandbathing on the dusty track.

The Hoopoe with its colourful detail and brown comb is another bird that keeps to the low bushes by the road. Tailor birds, Flower peckers, and Sunbirds are always plentiful and are found throughout the day. Overhead a party of Eastern Grey Swallows make their appearance early in the evening and are soon joined by a pair of common Ceylon Drongo who make quick flights to and from the tall trees. Pecking at the bark of a dead tree is a Rufous Woodpecker whose long and sharp beak pierces decayed wood in search of beetles and larvae.

As evening draws herons, Cattle Egrets and a dozen other water birds fly back to their roosting place while a lone Fishing Eagle glides majestically high in the skies. The ‘kwack, kwack’ sound signals the arrival of night herons and bitterns at the riverbed for their nocturnal forage. Calls of vivid tone and tune sound a final chorus before nightfall and the nightjars pick up the tune imitating the jarring of doors into the night, to the accompaniment of “Hmm, Hmm” of a Scops Owl.

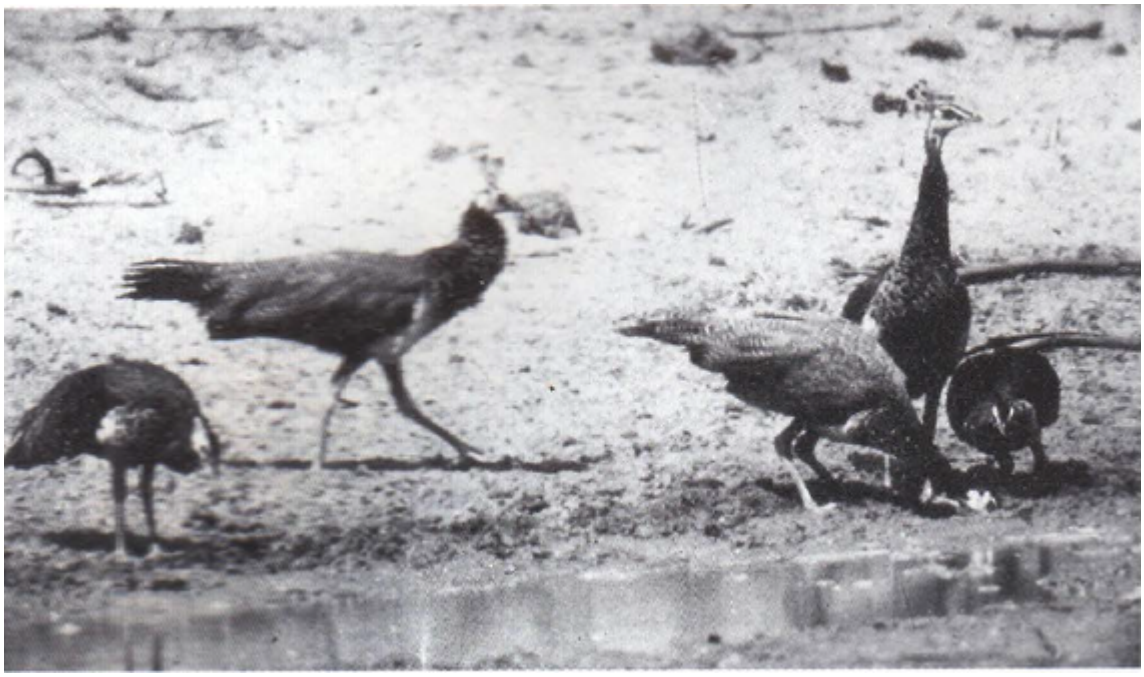
For the ornithologist and the serious birdwatcher the following list of 21 endemic species – found only in Sri Lanka -may be of special interest. Ceylon Spurfowl, Ceylon Junglefowl, Ceylon Wood pigeon, l.ayards Parakeet, Ceylon Lorikeet, Red Faced Malkoha, Ceylon Coucal, Yellow-Fronted Barbet, White-headed Starline, Ceylon Grackle, Ceylon Magpie, Yellow-eared Bulbul, Brown-capped Babbler, Ceylon Rufous Babbler, Ashy-headed laughing Thrush, Dusty blue Flycatcher, Pallas’s Grasshopper Warbler, Blight whist’ ing Thrush, Spotted Winged Thrush, Legge’s Flower becker, and Ceylon White-eye. Of these over 15 car: be observed in the Ruhunu National Park.



Black Winged Stilt keeps a sharp eye open for it’s food.



Flocks of spoonbills such as these are a common sight at Yala. (Fred. R. Malvenna)



Y01mg peafowl foraging for food at a water-hole. (Fred. R. Malvenna).



A Drongo resting on a branch after one of its swift flights. (Fred. R. Malvenna).



A pair of colourful Malabar Pied Hornbill perched on a branch, at Ya/a National Park. (Fre.d. R. Malvenna).