Thalangama Tank: A Paradise for Birds

Posted on

In a residential suburb of Colombo is a reservoir bordered by greenery and enriched with avifauna: Thalangama in Pelawatte is an oasis of calm.

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The drizzle that recurrently impeded the Colombo mornings was absent on that day at dawn. The sky was steely grey, with a patch of pale gold illuminating the eastern horizon. The world was still slumbering, but an orchestra of bird songs permeated the crisp air. It was 45 minutes past five, and we were at the Thalangama Tank, slightly shivering in the cool morning breeze that blew our way, rippling the quiet waters.

We were standing at a small islet that was barricaded at the outer edge by a weather-beaten sluice gate. When open, the sluice gate provided water to the vast expanse of paddy fields beyond our line of sight.

Our focus was on a pole that stood tall, several feet from the bund, in the shallow water of the tank. Its presence was puzzling, but what drew our attention was a common kingfisher sitting atop, its azure wings glistening in the pale morning light. We guessed, correctly, that it was waiting for a prey, but what we did not expect was for another kingfisher to swoop in to the same spot. What ensued could only be described as a fight for the best hunting spot. Both took flight soon after, and we decided to take a walk on the gravel road that encircled the tank.

Whistling ducks fly over the tank in elegant formation

The surface of the tank was covered in deep green lily pads. Dew glittered on the circular leaves, creating a sight that was simply enchanting. Red water lilies bloomed sporadically, and flocked around them were many whistling ducks, gliding gracefully. Along the bank, among the weed that grew, a pair of dragonflies, elusive adjutants, flew about, their flimsy golden wings fluttering in haste.

We stood awhile at the semi-circular spillway of the tank, relishing the loud monotony of water splashing down the miniature levee.

Our attention was yet again diverted to a jacana, which was swiftly darting across the surface of the water. In the centre of the tank, in an oasis of lily pads, an entire colony of jacanas could be observed, some gliding, some walking on the water. Among them we spotted a few pond herons, little grebes, white-breasted water hens, impressing us with the diversity of the avifauna.

The docked boats lend a nostalgic air to the Thalangama Tank

A lone yellow-billed babbler took off in flight as we approached the residential quarter of the beautiful neighbourhood.

We met a few joggers, and a couple of vehicles passed by. However, mostly, the area was devoid of any human presence.

To the southeast of the tank was an island entirely overgrown with aquatic flora: mangroves, poison nut and katu ikili (holy mangrove). Crowning the greenery of the mini-island was a large colony of open-billed storks. There were adults feeding the young chicks, and some basking in the sunrays that filtered through the mounds of heavy clouds. Their call was a cacophony rather than music to our ears, but we appreciated it; the call of the wild was always preferable to man-made noise. We noticed a water monitor stealthily gliding across the water towards the island; its morning hunt was probably due.

As the water body morphed into a wetland to the south of the tank, we spotted a

moorhen carefully shifting its way through, and a cormorant flew across the marshland towards the tank. The diverse wetland was abundant with mangroves, brindleberry (Kana Goraka), as well as malabar melastome (Bovitiya) that bore violet flowers.

An island for amphibians; a tortoise balances itself on the mossy trunk

A rustling sound above alerted us to the presence of a leaf monkey which loped over the branches of a kumbuk tree, possibly sensing our gaze. A lone tortoise that was lounging on a solitary log in the middle of the water whisked off at an unbelievable speed that we barely managed to snap a picture.

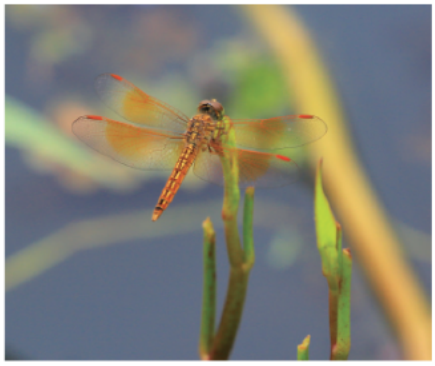
On the grassland, a purple heron stood tall and vigilant, and a purple moorhen treaded carefully, looking for its breakfast, we assumed. In the tank, a spot billed pelican was gliding smoothly across the water; a rare sight indeed, since this particular species is Near Threatened.

Our morning stroll ended at the edge of the marshland, which spread over a vast expanse and made a home to scores of Sri Lankan and migrant birds. A must-visit for nature lovers and bird enthusiasts, Thalangama Tank and the encompassing wetland are an ideal escape from the bustling city life, conveniently located a 30-minute drive away from Colombo. The blissful serenity, the solitude and the charisma of unspoilt nature draw visitors to the Thalangama Tank. We headed back to the city, taking back the memories of pleasant solitude, vivified by the symphony of bird songs.

The spillway removes excess water from the tank, while adding to its charm.

Enjoy the grace of red lilies and whistling ducks.

A Kingfisher on its hunting spot.



Elusive adjutant, a dragonfly with golden wings

Black-hooded oriole

The greenery is the perfect cover for a water monitor

The nearby trees were a playground for a leaf monkey.

The lush green fields that stretches to the horizon are irrigated by the tank’s water supply.