

A Trip to Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary, Thaftekad, Kerala, India

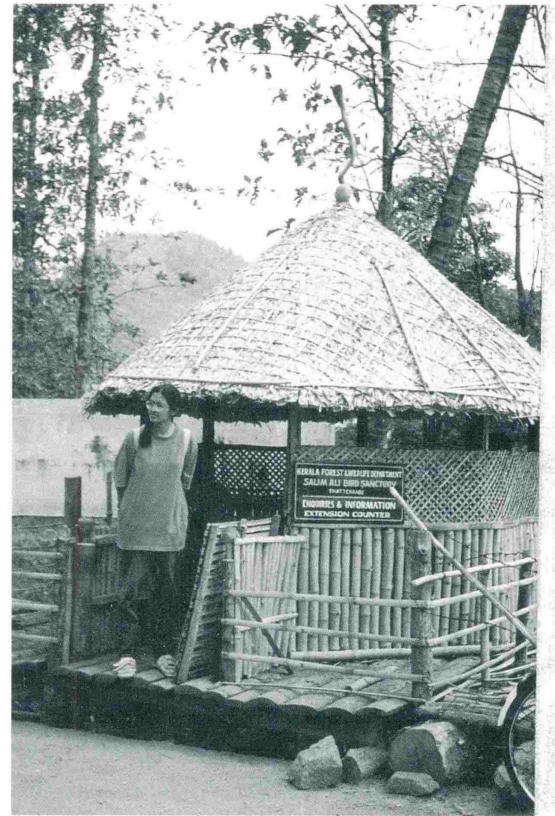
Text and Photos by Radhika Vatsan and Tavish Clureshi

On the western side of the Indian subcontinent is the rainward side of the western ghats, a lush green part of the country watered by every passing cloud. Here lies the quiet but beautiful haven for a wide variety of exotic flora and fauna. Thattekad, on the banks of the river Periyar, is a dense monsoon forest, not very far from the port town of Cochin. So here we decided to spend a couple of days, away from the bustle of city life, chasing avian delights.

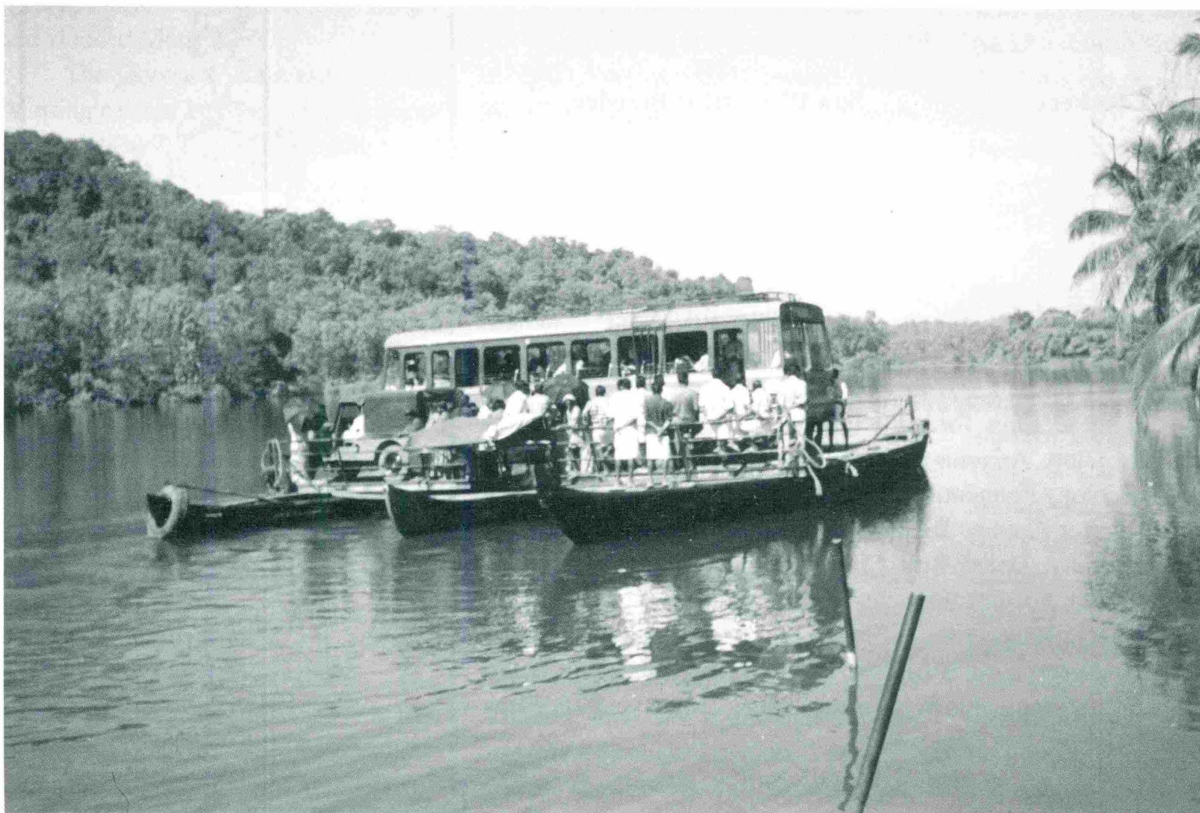
A pleasant bus ride from Kothamangalam early in the morning landed us on the southern bank of the Periyar, and we stood and gaped at the expanse of water, hardly seeming to flow, surrounded by low, thickly wooded hills. A score of gull-billed terns

were perched on a telephone wire stretching across the river. We were wondering where the sanctuary was when the conductor tells us it is on the other side of the river. How ever were we going to get across? And then we were treated to a most fascinating sight: there across the river was a BUS, floating towards us on a platform tied across three wooden boats!! So this was how we were to cross! A pretty bamboo hut informs us in green letters that we are at the "Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary." Large pied wagtails are gamboling all over the place. A bamboo bridge stretching invitingly across a placid lake, with an egret preening itself on one of the supporting poles, draws us across.

The other side is a little swampy forest, and little bird-sounds are heard



First, of course, one visits the sanctuary's information counter, in this case a bamboo hut where one can learn all.



To get to the sanctuary it is necessary to cross a bit of water – the slow moving Periyar River. The crossing is made by ferrying the bus across the river on a "ferry" contraption made by joining three small boats together. where there is a will, there is a way.

all around ... Swish! That was a Racket-tailed Drongo! Trailing its long tails gracefully behind it, it disappears among the trees... pushing through the thick undergrowth we follow some calls but the birds are tantalizingly beyond sight... a clearing with what looks like a dried watercourse affords a good spot to rest and watch. The ubiquitous Pond Heron sits patiently near the water, awaiting its prey... What is that musical warbling sound? Oh! there yonder are three Red-whiskered Bulbuls, playfully chasing each other from tree to tree! There is a movement amongst the leaves on that tree ... wait, there is a little green bird there! Where are the "binocs"? Oh! it's a Gold-mantled Chloropsis (or Jerdon's Leaf-bird), its gold-and-black markings setting it out amongst the leaves... There is a Chestnut-headed Bee-eater, just landed on that branch there... A little common Kingfisher skims the water making its little screaming noises, and disappears among the overhanging foliage, We are tired now and decide to move back and look for a place to stay.

The Hornbill Inspection bungalow offers comfortable accommodation for the day and the kindly old caretaker provides a sumptuous, typically Keralite meal with plenty of coconut in it. There is a tiny village near the sanctuary and we walk along the road past it and come upon a lovely lake. A couple of Red-wattled Lapwings fly screaming by. A family of ducks are waddling about near the shore. We walk on and sit on the opposite bank to watch a pair of raucous Little Cormorants chasing each other along the surface. They land gracefully in the water, using their tails to slow them down, and dive completely in after a quarry, only to emerge yards beyond. One perches on a little twig protruding from the surface and spreads out its wings to the sun to dry. A muddy road leads through the sanctuary to a village about 14 km away, skirting along the river at places and through dense forest. Just step in and you enter a forest of bird-calls, mindboggling in variety, assailing you from every side! Our friend the

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Magpie Robin is calling sweetly from the dense leaves of a tall tree. A little way beyond the river spreads into a lake and a Pied King-fisher is performing its amazing hovering act just above the surface before it dives in after its lunch! Herons and egrets are walking gracefully about near the banks, and a couple of Lapwings are busy at lunch.

A rocky slope to our right is an inviting climb closer to the trees and we plunge in, hoping to track some of the sounds to their avian source. That curious screech ending on a questioning note comes from the Blossom-headed Parakeet that just flew swiftly by, straight as an arrow. It has joined another one on top of a tall tree... an amazingly handsome bird with a glistening rose head and a long, thin, white-tipped tail... there among the thick bushes a sharp “chk” sound repeated at short intervals. A concentrated quest for this shy, very active bird finally reveals the little, olive-colored Blyth’s Reed Warbler. A large group of noisy Jungle Babblers is creating a perfect racket in a thicket beyond. This group is joined by a band of Racket-tailed Drongos, which are filling the air with a perfect concert of bell-like calls of various sorts. A sweet,

liquid note draws our attention to two brilliant Fairy Blue-birds perched right on top of a tree. They are answered by another group on another tree.

A harsh call and a flash of yellow draws our attention to a smart Black-headed Oriole. We are tired by now and sit down to snack on some bread and cheese, listening to the deep tones of the Coucal from within the forest. A Hawk-cuckoo is setting up its indefatigable “brain-fever.. brainfever” in a thicket somewhere... Some Red-vented Bulbuls are warbling to each other near the water... Suddenly there is a harsh, alarmingly loud call similar to a cock’s... it reverberates through the whole forest and we set out after it. But the further we follow it the further the sound recedes from us and the search ends in frustration. A bunch of common Mynahs are screaming to each other. Some cows are grazing peaceably on the slopes. Evening falls and the skies are painted orange by the setting sun. We come across a disused machan built for bird-watching... It is time to turn back now... that harsh alarming call is tantalizing us once again... a flash of red in the fading light proves it to be the jungle fowl – the hunt

is finally rewarded!

Morning sunlight filters through the dense trees. A welcome cup of hot tea at a little stall outside the sanctuary, and we are ready to rest from the day’s ample adventures.. night has fallen and the calls of some night birds occasionally break the deep silence. A myriad stars are sprinkled over the sparkling clear sky.. sleep comes fast!

The next day begins at early dawn: we have a lot more exploring to do within the very limited time we have. After a hot cup of tea we are ready to plunge deeper into the forest to track more birds. The deep peace of the tall, thick trees and the morning freshness are entrancing. Coppersmiths (little green Barbets) have started their hammering noises already. Racket-tailed Drongos are flying about chasing their breakfast, Along with their cousins, the Bronze Drongos, these naughty mimics fill the forest with all sorts of misleading calls. Little Sunbirds flit from treetop to tree-top, chirping merrily all along. The gold sunlight filters through the trees as the forest awakes. A little green bird proved to be the Large-billed Leafwarbler. We



Once in the bird sanctuary there are islands amidst the waters. This bamboo bridge called “Watcher’s Walk” was contributed by numerous bird watchers to make this part of the sanctuary accessible to visitors even though it is across a stretch of water.

pause at an enchanting little clearing, affording a majestic view of trees on all sides. We have left the river a little way away now. A pair of frolicking yellow birds reveal themselves through the binoculars to be Ioras. A sweet warbling tone attracts our notice and here is a handsome bird of the most astonishingly bright colors: a ruby-throated yellow bulbul. On a distant tree a bright scarlet bird alights but flies off into the distance before it can be identified. Further on I manage to spot a little black-and-white bird just before it flits away: a Pied Flycatcher-shrike.

The sun has advanced now but the thick tree-cover keeps us cool. A harsh call draws attention to a grey bird perched on a branch ahead: a large Wood-shrike, waiting for its breakfast. A strange, tinny, harsh call leads us to the Hill Mynah, its yellow wattles flapping about its face. We cross a little pebbly stream splashing down to the river further down, and decide to strike into the forest off the track and reach the river. A little indigo-colored velvety bird that couldn't be identified is flitting perkily among the low branches of a bush. Down through the trees we reach the river at last and settle down on its banks. A raucous call across the valley proceeds from a hawk that dives behind the hills before we can observe it carefully. Moving among the white flowers in the marshy banks of the river is a Bronze-winged Jacana, scarcely visible. It is late now: nearly noon, and we have a long distance to cover on our way back. So we reluctantly drag ourselves back along the way we came. A Paradise Flycatcher flies fairy-like just ahead of us in the trees. A tinny, laughter-like screech: a great Three-toed Golden-backed Woodpecker followed by its mate is a bright splash of colour against the brown tree trunks.

We are yet to spot the Great Malabar Hornbill, much to our disappointment. And now we hear the strange loud sound, described by Salim Ali in his book as that of a "dak-bungalow chicken being chased by the cook" and this must be it! We follow the sound for quite a dis-

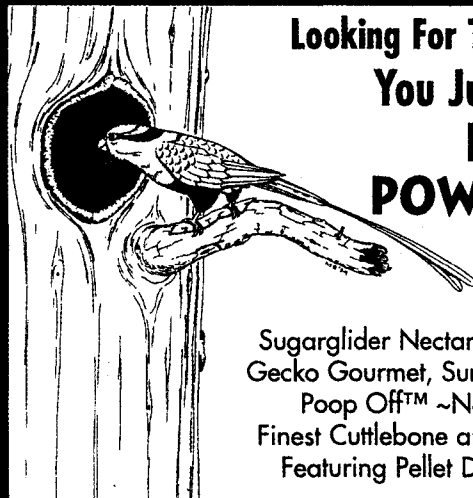
tance and then, there is a quick flash of flapping wings and the bird is gone! We have to console ourselves with Golden Orioles and make our way back to the gate. White-breasted Kingfishers are fishing calmly in the backwaters. Lapwings and a lone Bronze-winged Jacana now in the pond near the inspection bungalow are the last birds we see on this most fantastic of birding expeditions. We have spotted about 40 species in the evening and the six-hour morning marathon in Thattekad.

Getting There

For reaching Thattekad, one has to take a bus (charging Rs. 11) from Emakulam to Kothamangalam, which is a two-hour journey. These buses are not very frequent. Alternatively, one can take one of the frequent buses to Muvattupuzha and from there take a bus to Kothamangalam (a half-hour journey), which is a shorter route too. From Kothamangalam there are direct buses to Thattekad throughout the day, and one need not take a boat from

Boothathankettu. Thattekad is 15 km (read from milestones) from Kothamangalam and the bus takes about half an hour. On reaching Thattekad, the bus is ferried across the river Periyar on a contraption made by joining three small boats.

The sanctuary is very well maintained, and charges an entry fee of Rs. 5. Thattekad itself has very good lodging facility for bird watchers. There is an Inspection Bungalow called "Hornbill" in Thattekad (and not in Boothathankettu, as mentioned in the *Lonely Planet* India guide) with three double rooms for Rs 300 per night each. The caretaker of the Bungalow, a friendly old man, cooks excellent Kerala food for just Rs. 15 per meal. The sanctuary also has a mini dormitory for Rs 50 per bed, per night. Good food is available there too. Toilets are clean. The KTDC reception counter in Emakulam is unaware of this facility, and had informed us that there is no accommodation in Thattekad. ❖



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