



The bird that came in from the night

On the banks of River Pennar lies Siddavattam, a quaint hamlet near Cuddapah in southern Andhra Pradesh. A low, badly maintained road on the sandy and wide riverbed takes you across the river, and before you know it, you are driving past Siddavattam! The forests and hill ranges of the Eastern Ghats nearby are known to house many mysteries about India's natural history.

Vontimitta, another hamlet near Siddavattam, is known for the famous Kodandaramaswami temple. Passengers on the Mumbai-Chennai railway route can see the glorious temple gopuram when the train chugs out of Cuddapah towards Chennai.

It was mid-January 1986. I was camping in the Vontimitta Forest Rest House. I was part of a survey team that was in search of the Jerdon's or double-banded courser, a very rare and endemic bird (an 'endemic' creature is one known locally, and not found anywhere else in the world). While I had been involved in this search only since June 1985, the hunt for this rare bird had begun as early as 1848

when it was first sighted.

In that year, Thomas Claverhill Jerdon, a Surgeon Major with the British India Medical Corps stationed in Madras (now Chennai), had discovered the bird first. He had collected it for his natural history collection. He sent this strange and new bird-skin to an ornithologist, W. Blyth, who recognised it as a new species and named it the Double-banded Courser.

To come back to my story. On that eventful night, the Range Forest Officer of Vontimitta told me that Aitanna, my bird-tracker, had trapped a '*kalivi kodi*' in

his village, Reddipalli, north of Siddavattam. I knew that the local villagers and bird trappers recognised many kinds of birds as '*kalivi kodi*'. '*Kalivi*' is the local word for the *Carissa* bushes, common in these parts, and, '*kodi*' refers to any kind of fowl. I wondered whether Aitanna had found the bird I was looking for.

The survey had led me to travel all over the





The author Bharath Bhushan and the double-banded courser he rediscovered.



Eastern Ghats, on a very reliable motorcycle (which I called my old faithful!), with my camping equipment. On a good day, I would have driven off in search of Aitanna immediately. But that night it was raining heavily. I knew that the Pennar would be flowing over the low road at Siddavattam. It would be impossible to cross the river.

I felt pessimistic about seeing that bird that night on watching the thunderous downpour. But I kept hoping that on that day, we would record something for science.

Around 3 a.m., the fury of the rain seemed to have abated. I started the motorcycle around 4 a.m. It was still raining and the roads were dark. Usually, the lorry traffic on the Cuddapah-Chennai road is heavy even at night. But that night, thanks to the rain, there were not many vehicles on the road.

I crossed a small roadside junction called Bhakarapeta (also a railway station), and turned north towards Siddavattam. The river was overflowing and the low road across it was under water. So I drove back to Bhakarapeta and took shelter on the railway platform. My vehicle had kept sinking in the sandy roads outside, and the railway platform was the only shelter that could

protect me and my vehicle from the rain! There I was - alone on a small railway platform, with my motorcycle, on a very dark and rainy night, all for a bird!!

An hour later I drove again to the river, and this time the road could be seen faintly below the water. I decided to drive across. Aitanna, a local tribal who specialised in catching small birds and animals with many kinds of traps, was waiting impatiently for me. He rushed me to his house to show the bird that he claimed to be **the** 'kalivi kodi' that I was in search of.

The moment I saw it, I was engulfed by a huge wave of elation. Indeed it was the Jerdon's Courser or the double-banded courser! A bird that had not been seen since 1848! I could identify it by the distinctive white *naamam* mark on its forehead, and its crimson-red throat patch lined by a black-coloured double garland on its chest.

There it was, nestling in Aitanna's hand, looking at me uncertainly with its large beady eyes! As I stood in that rain-drenched shack, I was speechless and could barely nod when Aitanna whispered, "Anna, is this the bird? Is this your *kalivi kodi*?"

I dashed back to Siddavattam, as I realised that there was a lot of work to do. I rang up the Bombay Natural History Society and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department to inform them about the incredible rediscovery. The news spread like wildfire. The next afternoon, I was told that Dr. Salim Ali, the most famous Indian ornithologist, was on his way to see the bird!

The Andhra Pradesh Forest Department recognised the importance of the rediscovery by immediately declaring the forests as a Wildlife Sanctuary. Since the habitat of



Like the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of the double-banded courser, there are many other mysteries out there in the Indian wilderness. One such is that of the pinkheaded duck. Once upon a time these birds were known to nest in the remote forest ponds in the high mountains of the Northeast. And they would occasionally migrate right up to the east coast of Andhra Pradesh! Today these ducks are nowhere to be seen.

But they could still be out there. Only, you would have to seek them from the Eastern Himalayas, to northern Myanmar and maybe to Vietnam. And you may not find them until you have climbed the tallest peak, visited the remotest forest pond, trekked through the most desolate cloud-forest, met the best wilderness tribal expert ever, or spent cold rainy nights at 2 degrees centigrade, for night after day after night after...! The answer lies in being able to travel slowly through these areas in a hot air balloon, stop at the highest of forest ponds, and look out for these birds. That would be some expedition!

And there are many more such mysteries waiting to be solved — the Malay Sun Bear, the pygmy rhino, the twelve-tined deer of Kanha, the mountain quail...! Game, anyone?

the double-banded courser was part of the scrub forests of the Lankamalai hills, the protected area was named Lankamalleshwara Wildlife Sanctuary.

The Andhra Pradesh Government announced the rediscovery of the bird in full page advertisements in both English and Telugu newspapers.

Several government officials thought it was foolish to demarcate about 500 sq. km of very good forests as a no-disturbance zone and a Wildlife Sanctuary, all because of one bird that had been seen just once after 1848. Were we crazy? Except for Aitanna and I, nobody had actually seen the bird in the forests or its natural habitat. There were no photographs. There were no written reports, bulky scientific documents, or long lists of other wildlife that existed in the Lankamalai Hills.

Sadly, the double-banded courser that I saw died after just two days in captivity, perhaps due to the heavy rains. This incident saddened all of us. However, the good news is that since that sighting in 1986, we have often seen and continue to spot the double-banded coursers in



Dr. Salim Ali, with Bharath Bhushan and Aitanna at the site

the wild. Many photographs of the bird have also been taken.

Today it is illegal to capture this bird or keep it on display. It is listed in Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which makes hunting or captive collection an offence inviting punishment.

But since that rediscovery, we have

come to know that the forests of the Eastern Ghats are home to many endemic species. They include the yellow-throated bulbul, a beautiful and secretive bird, the golden gecko, a brilliant golden-coloured lizard that can change its colour to a dull grey and olive brown shades, and the *Cycas beddomei*, an almost dwarf-like palm.

And today, when I think back of that eventful day, of Aitanna and even my old faithful, I dare dream that maybe one day, yes maybe some day, the pink headed duck, now considered extinct, would also be.....?!!!

Text and photos: Bharat Bhushan
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