

Sowing the seeds of birdwatching and the mystery of a Spotted Owlet's death

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Six or seven years down the memory lane, I still remember the incident; I had gone to the office of the Melghat Tiger Reserve (MTR) in Amravati to procure a book, from MTR's library. The Range Forest Officer (RFO), who was in charge of the library was giving a copy of Dr. Salim Ali's bird book to a young boy of ten and said,

"Now go and read this book or I shall take you to task."

The flat-faced boy left the room with the book without uttering a single word. I quickly borrowed another book and hurriedly followed the boy and asked him:

"Do you like birds?"

"Yes" he said.

"Will you like to go out and watch them?"

"Yes" he said excitedly.

I befriended him and promised to take him on birdwatching trips. I noted his phone number and asked him to await my call on Saturday evening. His name was Vicky alias Mukul Gawai, the son of the RFO, who was eager to sow the seeds of birdwatching in his son's heart! What a stern method of inculcating love for nature!

When I called him on Saturday evening, he was very excited and asked for permission to bring a friend along. Thus joined Kishor Dudhe, only fourteen then. On Sunday morning we went on my bike for birdwatching to the nearby Pohara Malkhed Reserve Forest. I explained to them in simple language what to observe, how to take notes and how to identify birds. On the following Sunday, we were five; Kunal Ladukar and Pritish Umathe having joined our team. Soon the team grew to more than ten budding birdwatchers. They were Vishal Gawali, Satish Charthal and Kranti Rokde. Now we had to divide into small groups after introduction!

One day Vicky and Kishor brought an injured Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*) to my home. They had retrieved the owlet from a well in the front yard of Kunal's house, using a bucket. They had applied vermilion paste to the injured wing and tried to feed grains and biscuits to the bird. But it had not accepted them. I told them that it was a 'non-vegetarian' (carnivore). They went back and flushed their houses for mice and caught a number of insects and offered them to the injured owl. But, after a few days of futile efforts to revive the owlet at Kishor's residence the winged guest breathed its last. When the budding birdwatchers arrived at my residence to break the sad news, there was no need of it for me, for I could read it from their mournful faces!

Later, I prepared a small note with photograph of Kishor holding the owlet for publication in local newspapers. In my note I had underscored the passion of the kids to save the owlet. It was flashed very well in the media. Subsequent to these episodes, the families of these kids started encouraging them. They seldom refused permission to their kids to accompany me on birdwatching trips. Another important information which Vicky's father revealed to me was that his son had never gone out with anybody in his lifetime as he used to vomit, even during short journeys. But the same 'shy and introvert' lad had endured four days' stay in the dense forests of Melghat Tiger Reserve with me for our tiger census and had traveled a hundreds of

kilometers, without exhibiting the slightest discomfort!

By then, we had established good network with ten avid boys providing instant news about the birds in the area. I suddenly felt as if I had acquired ten new pairs of eyes. The keen sense of observation of the boys helped me a lot in enriching my own information, facts and knowledge about the birds. Along with these ardent bird enthusiasts I chanced upon the nesting of Blue-tailed Bee-eaters (*Merops philippinus*) (colony), Greater Painted-snipe (*Rostratula benghalensis*), White-breasted Waterhen (*Amourornis phoenicurus*), Spotted Owllet (*Athene brama*), Jungle Babbler (*Turdoides striatus*), Rufous-backed Shrike (*Lanius schach*), Plain Prinia (*Prinia inornata*), Jungle Bush Quail (*Perdica asiatica*), Common Coot (*Fulica atra*), Red-wattled (*Vanellus indicus*) and Yellow-wattled Lapwings (*V. malabaricus*), Red-necked Falcon (*Falco chicquera*) and many other species. The observations on a pair of Spotted Owllets that indulged in transvestism or trans-sexualism would not have been chronicled, but for the keen observations of these youngsters. These observations resulted in the triumphant publication of a few articles, in the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. In due course, I took the initiative to form a registered organization with the help of comrades from other fields also, viz., Dr. Prabha Bhogaonkar (Botanist and Ph. D. guide), Mr. Raghavendra Nande (Snake rescuer), Mr. Kedar Pawgi (Mountaineer) and others including Mr. Jayant Wadkar (fellow birder, now working on butterflies of the Satpudas for his Doctoral thesis). The organization was named 'Wildlife and Environment Conservation Society, Amravati'.

In August 2005, I was transferred to Nagpur much to the disappointment of my young birder friends. Even though I was in no mood to leave Amravati, I had no choice but to proceed to Nagpur. Nevertheless, the boys kept telephoning me, which was emotionally challenging. I was frequently besieged with nostalgic memories of our birding in Amravati. Now whenever the boys spot a new bird, they so vividly describe it to me, that I can identify the bird over the telephone itself! I am happy that presently Mr. Kranti Rokde and Satish Charthal have procured Grimmet's Guide and Pictorial Guide respectively. Kishor is now a 2nd year B. Sc., student and has opted for Environmental Science as his chosen field against the wishes of his father who wanted him to go for a degree in Computers! Kishor and Vishal are working as volunteers in the Kids for Tigers programme and spreading the message of conservation among the children.

It is now two years since I am posted out of Amravati, but invariably on every Sunday someone from my group is out into the wilderness with a binocular hanging proudly around his neck. A phone call in the evening on most Sundays about what was sighted on that day, gives me immense satisfaction and delight. The seeds of birdwatching that I have sown in the hearts of these youngsters are gradually growing and helping them into independent ornithologists!

Diet of Spotted Owllets and the mystery surrounding the death of one:

We collected the pellets of a pair of Spotted Owllets in Rohidas Colony in a semi-urban environment. The Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree where they roost is at the end of the colony. From here cultivation starts and continues to the Chhatri Range of reserve forests. Mr. Jayant Wadkar and myself analyzed the pellets (n=51) in the laboratory of the Department of Zoology, Amravati University, Amravati. We found nine bills of small birds including one each of House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Indian Silverbill (*Lonchura malabarica*), Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*), hatchling of domestic hen (*Gallus spp.?*) and three more bills of small birds, which could not be identified by us. Other evidences, which were used in confirming the identity of prey bird species, are feathers and hollow bones of birds in the pellets.

One small rodent (*Rattus sp.*) was also identified in the pellets from the skin pieces,

skull and teeth. Leaves of Eucalyptus were seen in separate pellets, which consisted entirely of leaf remains. I think that the birds might be consuming the leaves occasionally to cleanse the digestive system of some ailments, considering the medical benefits of Eucalyptus oil. Other items identified in pellets were grains of Jowar, Wheat, seeds of Grass (Poaceae). Probably they found the way into the pellets along with the bellies of granivore birds, which the owlets had consumed. Insect parts were also found, but they could not be identified at our level. Though the Spotted Owlet's diet is known to include small birds (Ali and Ripley 2001) plant rootlets (Jain & Advani 1983) and Eucalyptus seeds (Pande et al. 2004) details of bird species and Eucalyptus leaves were not reported. Nor the presence of grains in the pellets has been reported.

We have noted that the House Sparrows generally do not create a ruckus about the presence of Spotted Owlets, except when they have chicks in the nest. On 3rd March 2004 a Black Drongo was seen mobbing a Spotted Owlet. On 8th March 2004 a Spotted Owlet dived at a Five-striped Squirrel but the latter escaped. Otherwise the squirrels boldly moved around the owlets perched on the tree, sometimes approaching within a meter of them. On 28th March 2005, a Common Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*) and a Chestnut-shouldered Petronia (*Petronia xanthocollis*) created much commotion near a Spotted Owlet. On the evening of 14th May 2004 we observed a Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach*), a Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) and an Indian Robin (*Saxicoloides fulicata*) collectively mobbing a pair of owlets. On 28th May 2004 a Spotted Owlet was seen lunging at an adult Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) but the latter escaped.

On yet another occasion, we observed one of the owlets emerging from a well in the evening, in which House Sparrows were nesting. This observation also solved a mystery (after six years?) as to why an agile Spotted Owlet had fallen into the well in the front yard of Kunal's house as mentioned in the beginning of this article. The well also had nests of House Sparrows and the owlet might have tried to dive into a nest of the sparrows, in pitch darkness, probably for catching a nestling or for seizing a brooding Sparrow. The owlet might have injured its wing in the process, as it could not notice the thin wires in the well!

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