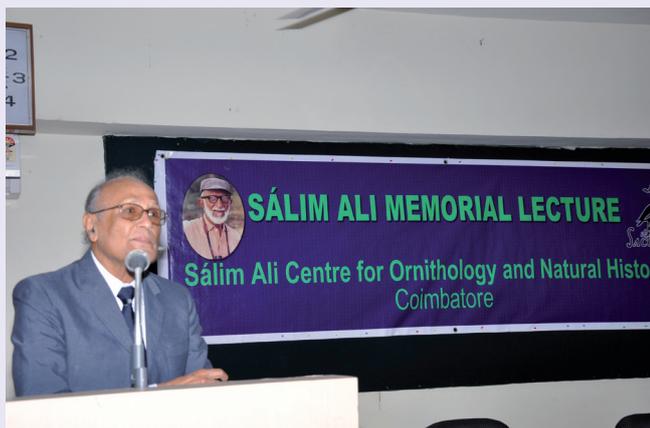


SÁLIM ALI MEMORIAL LECTURE 2015



SACON organized the Sálím Ali Memorial Lecture on 18th December 2015 at 10.30 am at the Champion Hall, Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Forest Campus, RS Puram, Coimbatore. Prof K P Prabhakaran Nair (Former Professor, National Science Foundation, The Royal Society, Belgium & Senior Fellow, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, The Federal Republic of Germany) delivered the memorial lecture on “*Altered Genes and Twisted Truth – the Story of GM Crops in India*”.

He began his talk with narrations of the genesis and the problems of green revolution often citing interesting and informative anecdotes from his vast and rich experience. He then went on to explain in much detail genetically modified crops, the biotechnology behind the GMO’s and vital differences between GMO’s and hybrids. According to Dr Nair, the term Green Revolution is a misnomer and the advent of high-yielding hybrid varieties of food crops that respond well to heavy chemical and fertilizer inputs has altered our agro-ecosystem beyond redemption. In the course of his lecture, he vividly pointed out different hazards from GM crops and cautioned agricultural scientists and activists to be wary of their popularization in Indian scenario. He clarified further that science, technology, and politics often join together to mislead the public and we should guard against such false propaganda in the name of science. Dr Nair also lauded that India is one of the few developing countries that has consistently resisted invasion of GM crops, though experimental and illegal use of GM seeds of particularly Bt Brinjal and Bt Cotton have been a matter of serious concern. He argued that GM crops are not an answer to India’s food requirements in future, and in fact, India has achieved self-sufficiency in food production. The real problem of our food security lies in its equitable distribution rather than more production. Responding to an opposite view during the interactive session after the lecture, he highlighted the importance of retaining the right to choice for farmers and consumers. He averred that when technology invades the farmer’s fields without their willingness or awareness, the right to choice is the causality and that may lead to unsustainable practices which benefit only a few.

The programme was presided over by Dr. T.S. Ashok Kumar IFS, Principal, CASFOS, who in his special address recalled the contributions of Dr Sálím Ali to Indian ornithology and nature conservation. Earlier, Dr. P.A. Azeez, Director SACON welcomed the gathering and outlined the scientific achievements of Dr. K.P. Prabhakaran Nair. Dr. P. Pramod, Principal Scientist, SACON coordinated the event and delivered vote of thanks.

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FIRST RECORD OF ORIENTAL DOLLARBIRD *EURYSTOMUS ORIENTALIS* FROM ODISHA

Oriental Dollarbird or Dollarbird (*Eurystomus orientalis*) is a medium-sized roller, slightly smaller than the widespread Indian Roller. Dollarbirds have a deep dark-brown head and neck that tapers into the bluish-green body plumage. The tips of the wings are dark-grey; the leading edge is bluish-violet, as is the throat. The tail is dark brown-grey. In-flight, a (dollar-sized) light-blue patch shows in the primary flight feathers, giving the species its name. The bill is stout, slightly down-curved and very conspicuously red with a tiny black tip. Outside the breeding season, the colour of the bill tends to be more subdued. The legs and feet are also red. Juvenile birds have somewhat duller in overall coloration and the bill, legs and feet are dusky grey (Ali & Ripley, 1987; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012).



In India, Oriental Dollarbird is found along the Himalayas from Himachal Pradesh east to Arunachal Pradesh and North-eastern Hills south of Brahmaputra and disjunctly along the southern Western Ghats (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012). Here, we report for the first time the occurrence of Dollarbird from Odisha.

Sighting of Oriental Dollarbird

The Berbera-Dhuanali reserve forest falls under Khurda Forest Division, Khurda, in Odisha. It covers an area of 350 sq. km. of a mixed deciduous forest with few patches of semi-evergreen forests (Siliwal et.al 2008). This forest is known for very old teak trees. Smuggling of timber is one of the problems and Central Reserved Police Force (C.R.P.F.) has been deployed for keeping a check on smuggling of timber. A team from Wild Orissa, consisting of Chinmaya Bhujabal, Diptiranjana Patra, Pradipta Pataseni and Bira Kishore Bhujabal visited Berbera in May 2015 for a bird survey. During the visit, one individual of Dollarbird was sighted, and recorded in Berbera (Banpur) near the forest rest house complex on 18th May 2015 by Mr. Bira Kishore Bhujabal. The bird was seen perched high on the bare branches of a tall tree and photographs were taken of the bird. From the field observations and plumage characters, we identified the bird as the Oriental Dollarbird using the regional field-guides (Grimmett et.al. 2011; Rasmussen and Anderton 2012).

Discussion

As per the regional ornithological literature and databases available in various sources (Shyamal, 2003; Envis Centre on Avian Ecology 2015), the Dollarbird has never been recorded from Odisha, and this seems to be the first well-documented record of the species from the State. In fact, this also extends the known distribution range of the Dollarbird to east-central India, as the species is known to have disjunct distributions in Himalayas and the southern Western Ghats. Our record of Dollarbird tends to fill the gap between these two landscapes adding support to the Hora's Satpura Hypothesis (Karanth, 2003). In recent times, several species of Eastern Himalayan birds like Jerdon's Baza, Thick-billed Green Pigeon, and Pale-capped Pigeon have been increasingly reported from various parts of Odisha, making this State a very important key to our understanding of the biogeography of Indian birds.

The forests and associated wilderness areas of the northern eastern Ghats like Berbara, Dhuanali, and Malin Khurda and Nayagarh districts of Odisha are rich in biodiversity (Chadha, 2004). These forests, besides their biodiversity value and conservation significance, are also home to numerous streams that flow into these districts ensuring freshwater security of the region. Thus, conservation of these forests is critical from not only the perspective of the Eastern Ghats ecosystem, but also from the perspective of the livelihood needs of thousands of humans settled in and around these forests. As carbon sinks and as source of fresh water as well as ecological regulators of the nearby areas, there is a priority need for long-term protection and conservation of Berbara and Dhuanali.

Acknowledgement

We are thankful to the Divisional Forest Officer (Khurda Forest Division), Company Commander (Central Reserve Police Force, Berbara) and forest staff deployed at Berbara for assistance rendered during this visit. We are also extremely thankful to Wild Orissa, an organization active in the field of wildlife conservation since 1997 for having facilitated our visit.

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THE SECRETIVE WARBLER

Birdwatching is probably the second most popular hobby next to stamp-collection and remains one of the most favourite outdoor activities today. This is because birds are colourful, diverse, ubiquitous, and are some of the best songsters in nature; they are also identified easily owing to excellent field-guides available today. But one particular group of birds, which still tests the patience and identification skill of birders, is the warblers. Often derided as 'LBJs (Little Brown Jobs)' by frustrated birders, they pose the greatest challenge for identification even to seasoned watchers.

For an easy understanding different kinds of warblers one can follow Baker (1997), who classify the Old World warblers into 8 major groups: (1) Ground warblers (*Tesia* spp.) (2) Bush warblers (*Cettia* & *Bradypterus* spp.) (3) Grass warblers (*Schoenicola*, *Locustella*, *Cisticola* & *Prinia* spp.) (4) Marsh/Reed warblers (*Acrocephalus* spp.) (5) Scrub and tree warblers (*Sylvia* & *Hippolais* spp.) (6) Tailorbirds (*Orthotomus* spp.) (7) Leaf-warblers (*Phylloscopus*, *Abroscopus* & *Seicercus* spp.) and (8) Goldcrests (*Regulus* sp.).

Most of the region's warblers are migratory as they breed in the higher Himalayas and beyond and winter in peninsular India. As such, we have to deal with fairly less kinds of warblers in the Western Ghats compared to the Himalayas; it considerably makes 'warbler-watching' much less complicated here. They are easier to identify in their breeding grounds where they sing their signature tunes but can be quite frustrating in winter when they emit non-descript calls that sound very similar. Among these warblers, I would rate the *Phylloscopus* leaf-warblers as the most challenging to identify in the field because of their tiny size, morphological similarities, seasonal wear in plumage, and highly restless behavior. They often forage high in the dense canopies of tall trees making it difficult even to locate them but



fortunately leaf-warblers (most, if not all) have diagnostic winter-calls. The other tricky warblers are those belonging to *Locustella*, *Acrocephalus* and *Hippolais*, which mostly prefer to hunt inside bushes and shrubs. Species belonging to these genera are great sulkers and very secretive rendering them invisible at times. One may misidentify them because they all seem to have common intermittently repeated 'chek-chek' notes in addition to their own distinct calls.

On one of the occasions while following this call during my fieldwork in Agasthyamalai Hills in southern Kerala, I stumbled upon Common Grasshopper-warbler *Locustella naevia* a less recorded long-distance winter migrant to the Western Ghats. One of its races *L.n. straminea* winters mainly in southern Western Ghats and central India as it breeds in eastern Siberia and Central Asia. The insect-like reeling call of Grasshopper-warbler is unmistakable in its breeding grounds unlike the harsh 'chek' call that we hear in winter. I had recorded this species six times in two consecutive winters of 2013 and 2014. Territoriality was evident as the same territories were occupied in both the years, making it easier to locate the birds and photograph them. They were sighted in low bushes on the edges of southern montane hill top forest at an elevation of 1200 meters and above. In southern Western Ghats, this species seems to prefer mostly high altitude grassy slopes near the edges of sholas as compared to its breeding ground where it prefers lowlands along the water edges, reeds and grasses. Sálím Ali also observed that this species prefers habitat in hillsides covered with tall coarse grass especially on the edges of sholas mainly above 1050m altitude. Sashikumar et al., (2011) also reported it from the highlands around Munnar and Silent Valley in Kerala. Contrary to our observations in high-altitude shrublands, several reports from Maharashtra have recorded this species in lowlands (Kasambe & Bhagat, 2014). Though the species is globally classified as of 'Least Concern' in IUCN assessment, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has included it in the British Red List owing to significant decrease in their population, over the years, in UK.

Grasshopper-warblers in particular are very secretive and are known for their flashing movements when they momentarily appear through the shrubs only to disappear immediately with their headlong plunge back into undergrowth. It is jocularly said that grasshopper-warblers are seen only once and if you lose sight of them, it would be near impossible to trace them again. They also have the curious habit of scuttling through the dense undergrowth like a mouse. This secretive behavior explains why the species, though not uncommon, is grossly under-reported from the region.

So, do watch out for these tiny mystery birds when you go birding in the hills of the Western Ghats next time. You may even flush them from right under your foot!

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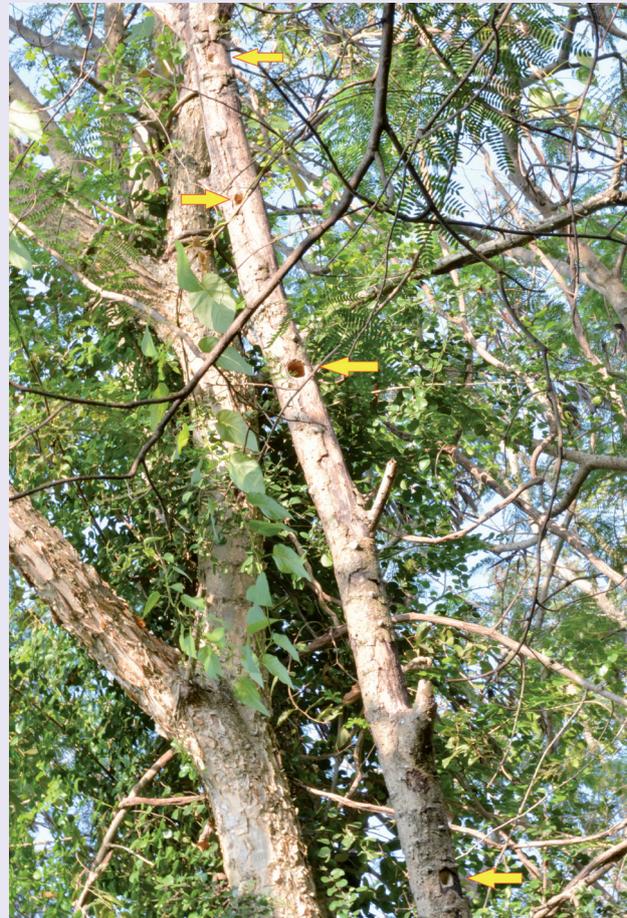
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NESTING OF WHITE-CHEEKED BARBET *MEGALAIMA VIRIDIS* IN SACON CAMPUS

“East or West, Home is the Best” - home means cozy security to us. But it also means the same to birds - our feathered friends. Birds construct their nests to prevent their eggs and chicks from predation and they show an incredible diversity of architectural skills while constructing their nests. They are nature’s builders par excellence with their envious collection of exteriors and interiors and a variety of designer houses like cup nests, mud nests, burrow nests, tree-hole nests, stick nests, ground nests, suspended cup nests, and floating nests.

I was fortunate to witness a pair of White-cheeked Barbets (*Megalaima viridis*) attempting to construct their nest in SACON campus since early December 2015. Barbets are primary tree-hole nesters in tropical forests (del Hoyo et al., 2002), meaning they excavate their own tree cavities for nesting, much like woodpeckers - their cousins taxonomically speaking. These holes are often used subsequently by other soft-billed secondary hole-nesting birds like parakeets, mynas, nuthatches, tits, and sparrows (Short & Horne, 2001; del Hoyo et al., 2002). This particular pair of White-cheeked Barbets was in search of a dead branch of a tree near the laboratory block and near the main administrative office at SACON. They started their excavation process in an *Acacia polyacantha* tree actively for few days, and in between, they didn’t miss a chance to visit a nearby dead stump but were finally satisfied with the former one.



Both male and female seemed to have shared the entire chores as they both took part in nest construction in equal measures. Typically, each partner would spend in nest-excavation about 5-7 minutes at a time, sometimes stretching the shift to about 11 minutes stopping in between to give attentive ears for any noise or disturbance. The frequency of strokes against the wood decreased when the bird was at the job for more than 7 minutes. The cooperation between the partners was very evident as the bird at work would leave only when its partner came and took charge and at times it would even look out for its mate in case of a delay.



When one was busy chiseling out the wood, the other bird would invariably be seen on vigilance nearby. I also watched both the birds engaged in excavating two different holes in the same tree at the same time.

Normally, barbets make their nests between 2 - 14 m height (sometimes even higher) (Short & Horne, 2001) (Yahya, 1989), and this pair was seen making their nest-hole at a height of about 8m. Ali & Ripley (1983) also note that they occasionally dig out more than one hole at the same branch. I also saw four freshly excavated nest-holes in this case, among which one was complete with the exterior well worked out.

Having seen the birds putting forth so much effort, I wonder if their nesting will be successful. As the proverb goes, hard work never fails. I am waiting for the day the fledglings will fly out successfully.

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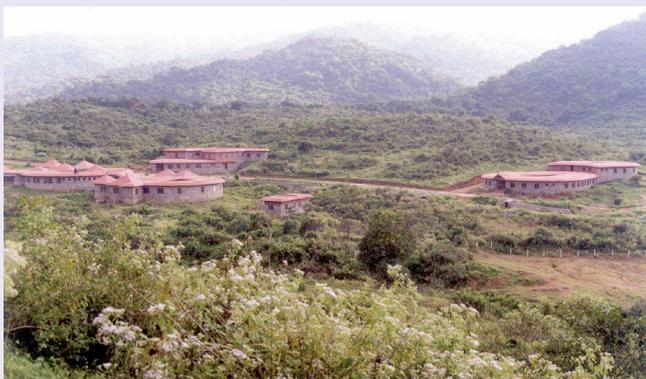
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SACON SILVER JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS (1991-2016)



SACON campus then



SACON campus now

The Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), a Centre of Excellence under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (Government of India) is completing 25 years. The Centre was founded with financial assistance from the MoEF&CC. The major objectives of SACON are to conduct and promote scientific research in ornithology and wildlife habitats and develop scientific solutions to species, habitat and landscape conservation issues, keeping in consideration the socio-economic realities and aspirations of the people.

SACON has been working in all the biogeographic zones across the country, covering the islands, coasts, wetlands, mountain ranges etc. SACON is entering the 25th Year, the Silver Jubilee Year of its existence. As part of the celebration of 25 years of research and conservation in Ornithology and Natural History, SACON is planning to conduct various programmes and events from January to June 2016. Major events and programmes planned are listed below. We seek the cooperation of individuals and organizations interested in nature conservation by their active participation in our programmes.

SACON SILVER JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS PROGRAMME

SI. No.	Date	Venue	Details of Events
1	28 January 2016	SACON, Coimbatore	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inauguration of Silver jubilee celebrations 2. Dedication of hostel building 3. Release of books <p>(i) "Flowering plants of SACON Campus" (ii) "Glimpses of the Ramsar Sites in India" (iii) Souvenir (SACON-25 years - glimpses)</p>
2	Feb-16	CASFOS, Coimbatore	Dr. Ravi Sankaran Memorial Lecture
3	Feb-16	CASFOS, Coimbatore	Silver Jubilee Lecture Series 1
4	Mar-16	Coimbatore	Silver Jubilee Lecture Series 2
5	Mar-16	Coimbatore	Silver Jubilee Lecture Series 3
6	Apr-16	Coimbatore	Silver Jubilee Lecture Series 4
7	Apr-16	MoEF&CC, New Delhi	Outstation Programme / Audio Visual Slideshow & Posters on SACON
8	May-16	Coimbatore	Dr. S Bhupathy Memorial Lecture
9	May-16	Coimbatore	Silver Jubilee Lecture Series 5
10	May-16	Trivandrum	Outstation Programme / Audio Visual Slideshow & Posters on SACON
11	02.06.2016 to 03.06.2016	SACON, Coimbatore	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. International Symposium 2. SACON Alumni Meet 3. Silver Jubilee Exhibition
12	Jun-16	Port Blair	Outstation Seminar / Audio Visual Slideshow on SACON

Contact: Dr. P. Balasubramanian, Convener - Silver Jubilee Celebrations, balumayura@gmail.com

WILDLIFE WEEK CELEBRATION - OCTOBER 2015



Shri. M.S.M. Anandhan presided over the function and delivered a talk on the importance of wildlife.

“World Habitat Day 2015” poster by SACON ENVIS team was also released as a part of the event by the honorable State Forest Minister Shri. M.S.M. Anandhan. More than 1000 participants, including school and college students, attended the Wildlife Week celebration and visited the SACON stall.

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Every year, the Wildlife Week is celebrated in the first week of October. This year, the Government of Tamil Nadu organised various programmes to celebrate the Wildlife Week in Tiruppur District on 2nd October 2015 that includes exhibition, competitions and cultural activities for school and college students. On this occasion, the SACON ENVIS team put up a stall and exhibited posters, publications, reports and Newsletters to create awareness among the students and public about the importance of wetlands, wildlife and conservation of wildlife. The State Forest Minister



सालिम अली पक्षि-विज्ञान एवं प्रकृति-विज्ञान केंद्र

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