

PR 25

The impact of nest collection
on the Edible-nest Swiftlet *Collocalia fuciphaga*
in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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PR25

R Sankaran



Sálim Ali Centre
for Ornithology & Natural History

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Front cover top inset - An Edible-nest Swiftlet nest with eggs, Baratang Island.
Front cover bottom inset - Nest Collector with nest.
Back cover - Rainforests, like that on Great Nicobar, are probably critical to the Edible-nest Swiftlets as they provide an abundant source of aerial insects.
- Photo credits : All photographs by R Sankaran

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Abstract

1. Ever since swiftlet nests became an important item in Chinese cuisine and pharmacy, Edible-nest Swiftlets have been exploited throughout their range, and now rank amongst the world's most expensive animal products.
2. The Edible-nest Swiftlet are currently not covered by International Trade Laws, and in India receives no protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
3. Based on nest counts, the population of the Edible-nest Swiftlet was estimated to be about 2010 breeding pairs in the Nicobar islands, and about 4620 breeding pairs in the Andaman islands.
4. The Edible-nest Swiftlet in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands is Critically Threatened (Revised IUCN criteria A1c), as it has undergone significant losses in populations, to the tune of 80% or more, due to indiscriminate and unrestricted nest collection. The present populations cannot sustain nest collection.
5. In the short term, the species urgently requires protection, and should be included in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act (1972). As protection of caves is near impossible, a mechanism that effectively stops trade in swiftlet nests, by checking people and cargo embarking or disembarking at all sea and air ports, from the islands to the mainland, needs to be established. Though other range states of the Edible-nest Swiftlet are against the inclusion of this species into the Appendices of CITES, the decline warrants formal international regulation in its trade.
6. An ex-situ conservation programme, house farming, by cross fostering eggs of the Edible-nest Swiftlet with those of the Whitebellied Swiftlet needs to be established. This can be effected by the following process:
 - a) A cave should be rigorously protected to ensure an adequate source of Edible-nest Swiftlet eggs. Only one cave, on Interview Island Wildlife Sanctuary, has both an adequate number of nests, and is so located that protection is feasible. This cave must be rigorously protected, and would yield over 1200 Edible-nest Swiftlet eggs per season.
 - b) Identification of existing man-made structures, preferably close to Mayabunder, where colonies of Whitebellied Swiftlet already exist. The Bakultala Forest Rest House is one such.
 - c) Development of houses to attract Whitebellied Swiftlet. The old PCCF office at Port Blair, and the DCFs residence at Mayabunder are both very close to jetties / bridges under which Whitebellied Swiftlet nest. With a little modification, these buildings would easily attract colonies of Whitebellied Swiftlet.
 - d) Cross foster the eggs of Edible-nest Swiftlet which are collected from Interview island, into the nests of the Whitebellied Swiftlet which are present in the houses / man made structures.
 - e) Encourage the spread of Edible-nest Swiftlet into other houses by following steps a to d above.
7. After 5-8 years, evaluate the status of the Edible-nest Swiftlet in caves and in houses. If house populations have reached harvestable sizes, bring the Edible-nest Swiftlet into Schedule IV of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and encourage the sustainable exploitation of the nests of the Edible-nest Swiftlet from farmed conditions.

Keywords: Edible-nest Swiftlet, Andaman & Nicobar islands, Conservation, trade, Sustainable use.