Six decades ago, Dr. Salim Ali wrote in The Book of Indian Birds: Perhaps the three rarest birds in India are the Mountain Quail, Jerdon’s Courser and the Pink-headed Duck. All attempts to re-discover the Mountain Quail and the Pink-headed Duck have been in vain. Now we seem poised to squander the second chance we were given with the Jerdon’s Courser.

This small, nocturnal bird is still found in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, where it is making its last stand in and around the Sri Lanka maleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS). But for how long?

A small, ground-dwelling bird that hunts between sunset and sunrise, the Jerdon’s Courser is named after a zoologist/British Army medical officer, Dr. Thomas C. Jerdon, who discovered the bird in the eastern Indian subcontinent in 1845. Not one Jerdon’s Courser was ever seen after 1900, and the bird had vanished for about a century till it was rediscovered in 1986 by Bhasha Bhushan, a researcher with the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), near the Lankanmalai Hill ranges in Cuddapah district.

Endemic to a country where some 13 per cent of the world’s birds have been recorded, the Jerdon’s Courser clings to existence in a tiny habitat of scrub forest threatened by livestock grazing, quarrying, and canal-building. One of the most serious threats to the Courser’s habitat had turned out to be the Telugu-Ganga Canal project, an agricultural irrigation project that was initially proposed in 1986. The rediscovery of the Jerdon’s Courser necessitated an alteration in the original canal route, which started from the Jogulamba Sagar Srisailam Tiger Reserve to Cuddapah, and would fragment and degrade vitally important habitat and thus sound the death knell for the Jerdon’s Courser. Conservationists not only lobbied successfully for the canal’s realignment, they persuaded the Forest Department to include the rediscovery site along the eastern fringe of the Protected Area.

Beginning in 2000, the BNHS began a systematic study of the Jerdon’s Courser. We were joined in this work by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; the Cambridge University and the University of Reading, with the research funded by the Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species (U.K.) and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department – a truly unique and global effort to protect an endangered species.

The known distribution of the jerdon’s Courser in 2000 was a single site just a few hundred metres in diameter in the scrub jungle of the SLWLS. Further studies, however, revealed that the bird could be found in the additional areas, all within 1.5 km of the initial site that was first rediscovered. The discovery of the bird’s further distribution from the adjacent forests of Tirupakonda ranganelly to the establishment of the Sri Lanka maleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SPLWLS) that spreads across the Cuddapah and Nellore districts.

Jerdon’s Courser has a strong preference for a particular density of scrub jungle habitat. They are most likely to occur where the density of large (> two metres tall) bushes is in the range of 300-700 per hectare, and where the density of smaller bushes is less than 1,000 per hectare. The bird also seems to prefer areas where there are woody plant species characteristic of mature scrub such as Hardwickia binata. We estimate that there are about 3,600 ha of habitat potentially suitable for the Jerdon’s Courser, most of it around the eastern part of SLWLS. Much of this habitat lies outside the SLWLS, which badly needs protection too.

Considerable progress has been made in developing standard survey techniques to detect the presence of the Jerdon’s Courser, to ascertain habitat requirements and identify new sites in and around the SPLWLS and SPLWLs. With the help of the BNHS, the Initiative for the Survival of Species (U.K.) and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department – a truly unique and global effort to protect an endangered species.

Digging a Grave for the Jerdon’s Courser

By P. Jeganathan and Dr. Asad R. Rahmani

In the last hearing on March 11, 2006 at Hyderabad, the state government sought time to examine the alternative provided by BNHS on the realignment of the Irrigation Canal. The CEC directed that the State Government should decide on the same in four weeks time. In the interim period, there should not be any further construction till the alternative route is worked out. The CEC was also informed that the FIR against the DFO of Kadapa who had taken action against the Irrigation Department has also been withdrawn.” – Ritwick Dutta, Lawyer

Children watch the construction of the Telugu-Ganga Canal project that threatens to wipe out the Jerdon’s Courser, a bird that has been celebrated on postal stamps and special seals, but seems not to be valued in truth by the Andhra Pradesh government.
digging a grave for the jerdon’s courser


As of now as much as 22 ha. of Jerdon’s Courser habitat have been lost in the eastern part of the SLWLS thanks to this illegal canal. In other words, one of the three new sites where the Jerdon’s Courser has been sighted since 2000 has disappeared.

Though work on the canals has been stopped for now, we must presume it could be restarted at anytime, given the scant respect the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation Department has shown for conservation or the law. And if we allow this to happen, that would place the canal within 500 m. of the crucial site where the Jerdon’s Courser has been regularly sighted since the day it was rediscovered. There is no other spot in the world where this beautiful bird can be reliably seen or heard.

Aitanna, a forest guard with the Cuddapah forest division lives in the nearby Reddipalli village. He has probably seen the Jerdon’s Courser more often than any other living person. He played a pivotal role in Bharat Bhushan’s rediscovery of the bird in 1986, and clearly remembers the day he met the late Dr. Salim Ali, who came to Reddipalli soon after the rediscovery of the Jerdon’s Courser to help fight for the realignment of the Telugu-Ganga Canal, and the establishment of the SLWLS.

When this bird is the pride of Andhra Pradesh, why is it still so difficult to protect this rare bird?” Aitanna asks. And we have no ready answer for him.

Sanctuary readers can help ensure a peaceful refuge for the beautiful and rare Jerdon’s courser by writing to the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Send a polite letter asking for 1) the realignment of the canal constructed around the eastern part of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary; and 2) that the sanctuaries be enlarged to incorporate important Jerdon’s Courser habitat currently on the fringes or outside their borders.

Scrub jungle with open areas are the preferred habitat of the Jerdon’s Courser. Explosives blasted the hillock to cut the canal thus damaging the critically-endangered Jerdon’s Courser’s habitat.