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A passionate moment,  
when etched in one's  
memory, makes a  
beautiful narration, and  
the author has made  
sure of that.



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# Call of the Jerdon's Courser

*There are certain moments in every nature lover's life, which he never forgets. It could be anything – the first sighting of his study animal in the wild, or watching some rare migrant in his favourite bird watching site, or looking at his favourite tree in bloom. These moments remain vivid in one's memory for long, before they are shared with others. Let me share one such moment with you that I was passionate about, the moment when I first saw the Jerdon's courser while it called.*





## The courser's call

### Text and Photographs: P. Jeganathan

P. Jeganathan is a Senior Research Fellow at the BNHS. He is presently studying the Jerdon's courser in the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary.

**T**he Jerdon's courser is a small, nocturnal, elusive bird. It was rediscovered in January 1986, near the Pennar river valley in Andhra Pradesh; the area was later declared as a sanctuary exclusively for this bird. The Jerdon's courser has since then been known only from the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, in Cuddapah district, Andhra Pradesh.

In 2000, the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) joined hands with the Universities of Reading, Cambridge and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to initiate a research project, with the help of Darwin Initiative and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department. One of the achievements of this joint project was the recording and identification of the call of the Jerdon's courser, which was not known before.

Why should recording and identifying the call of a bird be so significant and important? Calls indicate the presence of elusive birds, like Jerdon's courser, especially if we want to know their geographical distribution, which is poorly known. Calls can be of great help during field surveys.

February 17, 2001, was the day I heard and recognised the call of the Jerdon's courser for the first time. Right from the beginning of the study (from December 2000) I had been listening to the calls of nocturnal birds at dawn and dusk, in and around the place where we had sighted the Jerdon's courser inside the Sanctuary. Apart from nightjars, I had heard stone curlews and red-wattled lapwings regularly, and sometimes spotted owlets.

On that particular day I was at my usual place. The common Indian nightjars were the first to announce their arrival by chattering soon after sunset.

□ **Open areas in scrub jungle are the most likely places to spot a Jerdon's courser**



**Identifying and recording the call of the Jerdon's courser is a significant ornithological event of our time**

The Franklin's nightjar came next, its call lashing the air, followed by the bubbling Jerdon's nightjar. Amidst this cacophony came a series of long high-pitched whistles from the stone curlews. It was about 6.30 p.m. and the sun was just below the horizon. I expected to hear red-wattled lapwings, as they roosted there at night. But I heard something new, "*kwick-koo... kwick-koo... kwick-koo*"! The call went on for about a minute. It was peculiar and sounded as if it came from somewhere very close, not from one direction, but from three different directions within a minute. Was it the call of the Jerdon's courser? The very thought gave me goose bumps. I concentrated on the direction from where I had heard the call. I noticed some movement under a small bush and pointed a torch at it.

It was a Jerdon's courser! I was overwhelmed. I had heard the call of the Jerdon's courser for the first time. The unfortunate thing, however, was that my recording equipment was not with me. I had stayed back to listen to calls while on my way back from some other work. I regretted having missed this rare opportunity to record the voice on tape; it was nearly nine months – November 2001 – before the next opportunity arrived.

On one occasion, during twilight, I had a brief glimpse of the Jerdon's courser in flight. It landed behind a bush and immediately I heard a similar call from there, confirming that what I had heard was the call of the Jerdon's courser.

My excitement at this discovery was, however, short-lived. When I told Dr. Asad R. Rahmani, who is

## **The courser's call**

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## The courser's call

the supervisor of this project, about the call, he was delighted but asked, "Have you seen the bird while it is calling?" "Not really, but I have heard the call from places where the bird was seen to walk or fly away from within a few seconds", said I. He was not completely convinced. He told me that while we could be 99% sure that it was the call of the Jerdon's courser, we could be 100% sure only if we saw the bird while it called. Would this ever be possible?

Broadcasting recorded calls may elicit vocal responses or an approach by the bird, and then I may eventually see the bird when it is calling. I did try this theory and got response from Jerdon's coursers too, but saw nothing as it was pitch dark.

We had decided not to play the call very often, fearing that the birds in the area might get habituated to the tape and eventually not respond at all. So I broadcast it once in 15 days and monitored the calling behaviour of the Jerdon's courser at dusk, to know the frequency of calls at different times of the year. In the process, I found that the Jerdon's courser does not respond to the call of its own species very often.

Though I was getting responses once in a while, I had a strong desire to see the bird while it called. I wondered sometimes if I ever would be granted this wish. My scepticism arose from the fact that the Jerdon's courser is nocturnal, and I had never seen or heard them during the day. The only way to accomplish this would be to radio tag a Jerdon's courser. The identities of calling individuals can be established at the time of recording by a combination of radio tags and calling location. This I could not do as I did not have permission to catch the bird. I was sure that the call was of the Jerdon's courser, but I could never say, "I have seen the bird while it was calling."

Meanwhile, I was busy surveying other parts of the Sanctuary with my pre-recorded tape to find them in new areas. But, I kept visiting the core area to listen to calls whenever I found the time.

May 17, 2002, was a hot summer day in Cuddapah. The Jerdon's coursers were not calling much even in the core area, as they did during winter. On that day Rahim, my assistant, and I were in the core area before our usual time. It was about 6 p.m. and the sun



**The monotonous chuckling of the common Indian nightjar announces the arrival of dusk in the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary**

was just above the Lankamalai hill ranges. During summer, it generally got dark at about 6.45 p.m. We had walked towards our regular listening point and suddenly we heard the very familiar call, but we kept walking. Again we heard the call, but this time it was a little closer. Sometimes when you see somebody, whom you know very well, in an unlikely place, or at unusual time, you may take some time before you recognise them. We stopped and looked towards the place from where the call seemed to come. I looked at Rahim and his face was full of joy. We had heard the Jerdon's courser!

Immediately Rahim pointed at the tape player, which had the pre-recorded Jerdon's courser call, and gestured if he should play it. I said no. Although my quest was to watch the Jerdon's courser while it called, I first wanted to see the bird in natural light. The call came from about 25 m away from us. We slowly walked towards it, and heard the call again, and it lasted for about 30 seconds. After a short while, we saw the Jerdon's courser fly to our right. It flew away with gentle wing beats, showing the white rump, and the white patches at the tip of the primaries. Fortunately for us, it landed where there were no big bushes, about 20 m away from us. It looked around and slowly walked a few short paces. We immediately lay down on the forest floor since there was nothing between the bird and us except stones and grasses. Oh! That beautiful orange throat patch! It was a treat to watch this enigmatic bird in sunlight. All the while my heart was thumping and

## The courser's call

my mind was begging that bird “Please open your beak, I want to see you while you are calling.”

The Jerdon's courser must have read my mind. It turned away from us and went behind a small thorny bush. Though it was not fully visible, it wasn't completely out of my view. As soon as it went behind the small bush, I heard a faint “*kwik-ko*” from there. “Well, I have seen the bird in sunlight. I have heard the call, which appears to come from that bird. But I am yet to see it while it calls.” I believed my eyes, but everything that one sees and hears need not be the truth. I had been dreaming about seeing the bird while it called, right from the day I recorded its call. There was no place for supposition this time. I was not ready to console myself with the incomplete performance of that Jerdon's courser.

Rahim asked me again if he could play the tape. I did not want to miss this golden opportunity to convert 99% surety into 100% certainty. This time, without hesitation, I asked him to play the tape. We played it only for 15 seconds and stopped. We were watching the bird anxiously for its reaction. As soon as we stopped the tape, the live bird started uttering the initial notes of its two-note call several times, but it still stayed behind the small bush. We waited patiently and after three minutes we played the tape again for 15 seconds. This time the bird didn't disappoint us. It ran away from the bush with a lowered head and hunched body that helped

us take a good look at it. Then it turned and looked towards us and stood upright. Though it had not responded vocally, its behaviour indicated that it was alarmed. But this wasn't what I wanted. Finally, after five minutes we played the tape again for 15 seconds and then it finally happened. It started calling! Right in front of us and this lasted for about half a minute! At last, I really was seeing the Jerdon's courser while it was calling, that too in ample sunlight.

So, this is how the call of the Jerdon's courser was recorded and identified nearly 15 years after its rediscovery. We used this call in the tape playback survey to detect its presence in new areas. We found this elusive bird in three new places in and around the Sanctuary. Historically, the Jerdon's courser was known mainly from Andhra Pradesh. It has been reported from Khammam, Nellore, Anantapur and Cuddapah districts in Andhra Pradesh, and also from a place called Sironcha, in east Maharashtra. But now they are regularly sighted only in and around the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary. It may occur wherever suitable habitat exists. But those places have not yet been surveyed. It is very important to conduct a large-scale survey to find the Jerdon's courser in new areas, since its habitat is reducing due to various anthropogenic activities with every passing day.

One of our team members, Dr. Rhys Green, floated the idea of familiarising this call to birdwatchers in Andhra Pradesh, so they could inform us if they



Radio-tagging a Jerdon's courser may help to understand its interaction with the red-wattled lapwing, a bird seen in scrub jungles



## The courser's call

heard this call from new places. It is difficult to see this bird since it is small, nocturnal and furtive, but one can hear its calls in the evening in a potentially suitable habitat. As a small team cannot possibly survey the entire state, we have designed a small sound box, which reproduces the call of the Jerdon's courser. This call can be heard by gently pressing both sides of the box. It is not loud enough for broadcasting, but does help the listener remember and identify the call. This box has been distributed among birdwatchers, forest department officials, villagers, and tribal people in the Cuddapah district. We have also distributed brochures in local languages that briefly explain the aims of the project, call listening procedures and our contact details.


Four major expeditions were organised by the BNHS to find this bird before it was rediscovered. Many locals, forest officers, hunters, bird trappers were interviewed; pictures showing differences between the Indian courser and the Jerdon's courser were widely distributed. Eventually, it was found near Reddipalli village in Cuddapah district. But till date we know very little about the geographical distribution of the Jerdon's courser. It has mainly been reported from scrub jungles with open areas. It does not seem to prefer dense scrub forest or more open forests and calls mainly in the evening, starting 45-50 minutes after sunset, continuing for a few minutes to about 20 minutes. The bird gives between 2 and 16 calls in a sequence at about one call per second. Each "kwik-koov" can be considered as

one call. It has been estimated that the call can be heard from c. 200-250 m.

If you are in Andhra Pradesh, and plan to visit the scrub jungle for bird watching, do write to us so that we can send this sound box to you. All you need to do if you find scrub jungles with open areas, is to go out in the evening just before sunset, and listen for night bird calls. Try to stay there until about one hour after sunset.



**This sound box helps a listener remember and identify the courser's call**

If you are in a group, try to spread out, about 200 m between each listener, to cover more area. If you hear the Jerdon's courser call, I am sure it will be an exciting and unforgettable moment for you. And then do not forget to inform us; do share these moments of joy with us too. 

After a long wait the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India has granted permission for radio telemetry studies on two Jerdon's coursers on March 14, 2005. The Chief Wildlife Warden, Andhra Pradesh has also given a no objection certificate.

The Bombay Natural History Society and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, U.K. will soon start a study in the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah district, Andhra Pradesh. Radio-tagging will help to unravel the secret life of the Jerdon's courser. Some of the intriguing questions that we plan to seek answers to are

- How large is the home range of the Jerdon's courser?
- Does the Jerdon's courser move between areas and habitats?
- What is the Jerdon's courser's population?
- Where does the Jerdon's courser nest?
- When do Jerdon's coursers breed?

*We at the BNHS thank the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department for granting us permission to conduct this study.*



### Sheila Dikshit inaugurates CEC-Delhi



BNHS PHOTOLIBRARY

**Mrs. Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister, Delhi State appreciated the display rooms at CEC-Delhi**

A new Conservation Education Centre (CEC) of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) was inaugurated at the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary, New Delhi on March 11, 2005, by Mrs. Sheila Dikshit, Chief

Minister, Delhi State. Mr. Rajkumar Chauhan, Forest Minister, Delhi Government was also present on this occasion. The Government of Delhi has provided financial assistance to develop and operate the Centre for three years.

CEC-Delhi will design and implement conservation education programmes for children and adults from Delhi and surrounding areas. The Centre has thematic displays and a self guided nature trail. The programmes will also include thematic workshops for amateurs on bird watching, study of insects, nature photography and conservation issues. It will work closely with the Forest Department, local NGOs and BNHS members. □

For details contact: Mr. T.K. Sajeev  
Education Officer and In-charge  
Conservation Education Centre,  
Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary,

Near Karni Shooting Range, Tughlaqabad,  
New Delhi 600 044, India. Tel.: (91-011) 2604 2010

### Celebrating 365 days of nature information

On April 22, 2005 the Nature Information Centre (NIC) of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), at Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP), Mumbai completed one year of service towards nature conservation, through nature education and public awareness. April 22nd is also celebrated as Earth Day.

The BNHS-NIC is a joint venture between the Forest Department and BG India. At a get-together on this occasion Mr. Prashant Mahajan, Centre Manager, CEC-Mumbai gave a presentation on the important activities of the NIC and its achievements during the year. Mr. R.B. Sule, IFS (Retd), Ex-Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Maharashtra State was the chief guest. Mr. Prem P.S. Yaduvendu, Chief Conservator of Forests Wildlife, Mumbai, Mr. Kapil Garg, Managing Director, BG-India and Dr. P.N. Munde, CF & Director, SGNP also graced the occasion.

Five individuals were felicitated for their outstanding support towards the centre's activities and for their help in nature conservation. They are Mr. Anand R. Bharati, Ex- DCF, SGNP; Mr. Uddhav Kholamkar, President, Association of Heads of Secondary Schools, West



BNHS PHOTOLIBRARY

**School and college students are regular visitors at the NIC**

Ward; Mr. Vinayak Parab Senior Editor (*Loksatta*) and in-charge *Mumbai Vrittant*; Ms. Anuja Chawathe Reporter (*Loksatta*) and Ms. Janaki Fernandes Reporter (*Mid-day Metro*, Borivli). Each nominee was presented with a trophy.

A new ticket counter and 3-D Model signage were inaugurated by Mr. R.B. Sule and Mr. Kapil Garg respectively on this occasion. □

## News Briefs

### Teens train to care this summer



**Casting pug-marks was one among the many things that teens of Mumbai learned this summer**

This summer students from Mumbai had a unique opportunity of participating in a 'Vacation Training Programme on Bioresources' jointly conducted by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India. The month long residential course was designed to enhance their awareness on the relevance of bioresources, and the relationship between bioresources and biotechnology.

The course was held from May 2-27, 2005, for students 15-18 years of age, at BNHS's Conservation Education Centre, Mumbai. The students were provided with books and other material, and free transportation, boarding and lodging during the training. The course comprised of extensive field trips to different ecosystems within the city such as Sanjay Gandhi

National Park, Borivli, Godrej Marine Centre, Vikhroli, Flamingos at Sewri and Aksa beach. Study visits were organised for the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education, Mankhurd, National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, Worli, Maharashtra Nature Park, Dharavi, Orchid Hotel, Wilson College and Blatter Herbarium. The interactive indoor sessions included poster and skit presentation among others. The highlights of the course were the individual research projects designed on the flora and fauna of the BNHS land. The course provided opportunities for hands-on experience in the field and interaction with eminent experts from various fields.

The course, for the 30 participating students, was financially supported by the Department of Biotechnology and technically by the BNHS. It also would not have been possible without support from our volunteers, 10 of whom were involved throughout the course. □

### Distinguished Service Award

The Awards Committee of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), a premier professional society for those seeking to conserve biological diversity, has selected Dr. B.C. Choudhury, Executive Committee member of the Bombay Natural History Society as the recipient of the 2005 Distinguished Service Award. The award is in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to the conservation of India's biodiversity, particularly the olive ridley sea turtles, gharials and the sarus cranes through science, policy and advocacy. The Awards Ceremony will be held at the 19th annual meeting of the SCB in Brasilia from July 15-19, 2005. □

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