

# Denizens of the Free Air

## Some Aspects of Bird Watching Methods

N. Vetharanya Seyone

A jungle fowl hen with its brood of tiny chickens, all flying, head brushed past my wind-screen while I was motoring from Anuradhapura to Puttalam sometime in 1947. It was a rare sight but momentary and fleeting. The flock itself was excited, so was the observer, and it left only a hazy impression in my memory.

Whereas the frequent flocks of mother jungle fowl hens and their broods which I was able to observe leisurely during my "sit ins" in the Walk-in-Aviary of the Dehiwela Zoo, left vivid impressions that still last and can be recalled at will without effort.

Similarly, the occasions on which I had seen and heard the crowing of Jungle Fowl cocks in the wilderness are hazy, not vivid impressions – comparatively difficult to recall and require much effort to do so. A darting dazzling bird with vivid colours crossing roads and footpaths in an excited hurry is the image that occurs when an effort is made to recollect experiences in the wilderness.

Compare this with the numerous occasions on which I have seen and heard the crowing of the Jungle Fowl cocks and cockerels in the Walk-in-Aviary, getting ready to crow with the flapping of wings, raising of head, beak pointed upward, and then the unmistakable delightful note of crowing. The impressions are vivid and imprinted in your memory ready to be recalled at will without effort.

What I am trying to portray is succinctly expressed by Mr. Roger Tony Peterson, Dean of American Bird Watchers. "I am seeing things I've never seen before. I am getting photographs I've never been able to get in the wild where jungle canopies are too dense and the birds too cautious".

He is referring to the Lila Acheson Wallace World of Birds – an extra ordinary new garden of Eden – opened in June 1972 in New York Bronx Zoo.

The main point is that the birds in the Walk-in-Aviary, besides being happy, contented and feeling free, are also conditioned to seeing prying (observing) eyes and camera lenses, psychologically oblivious to the presence of people. To them they are part of their environment with which they blend.

Rathakrishnan's philosophy of "*Unity in Diversity*" applies also to both aspects of bird watching. Both aspects blend into a harmonious whole the object of which is to add more knowledge to a growing nascent science — Ornithology which is taking its place in academic fields along with Zoology and Botany.

Says Jean George, author of an Article on "New Wonder World of Birds" referred to earlier (The article was written in January 1973.):

"Ten years ago, most of the creatures on display in American Zoos were captured in the wild. Today, Zoos have an "Animal Pool", to trade surplus birds and beasts among themselves, and use it to replace a large part of the annual loss. In fact the breeding of wild life in Zoos is saving certain species from extinction".

The enthusiastic Director of New York City's Bronx Zoo, Mr. William Conway says "Zoos may become the best survival grounds for some".

My comments on the above remark:  
The specimen of the stuffed Passenger Pigeon

housed in the New York Museum, a long while ago, named "Martha" might have been a different episode if facilities like a brooding room and an incubator had been available at that time.

A pair of breeding birds in a Zoo would have saved this species from extinction.

Some time before "Martha" was kept as a specimen for view at the New York Museum, large flocks of Passenger Pigeons used to fly overhead, sometimes covering the sun from view. So numerous were these birds in the New World, till "sportsmen" and settlers shot them down indiscriminately. This ultimately led to the extinction of the species.

The Dodo is another example of extinction of another species. "As dead as a Dodo" has come to stay as an English Idiom.

I give below two quotations from Mr. Conway and Jean George. Conway:

We have another equally important job to do. Today three fourths of our population are urban. If they are to learn about Man and his Environment, it is vital to concentrate the Education right here in the cities where the crowds are.

Jean George: As I stood before the motmots the truth of this point was strongly brought home. A woman beside me suddenly turned to her young daughter, "look! The birds are building a nest! Obviously they had never seen such a thing before, and for fifteen minutes they stood transfixed whispering excitedly. As they finally turned away, the mother said "we must come back every day to see what happens". And that to me reveals the real success of the "World of Birds".

Sri Lanka's counterpart of Mr. Roger Tony Peterson — Dr. R.L. Spittel, wild life enthusiast was bird watching in the deep south of then Ceylon, when he received a message from the then Director of the Dehiwela Zoo that a live specimen of a Golden Backed Woodpecker had arrived at the Zoo. Dr. Spittel hastily sped to Colombo to see it for himself. This specimen was sent by me, and given to me by a resident of my Division in the Mannar District, who had heard of my interest in birds.

In my attempt to justify my "sit ins" in the Walk-in-Aviary of the Dehiwela Zoo at a particular point of time, I feel I have tilted the scales in favour of one aspect of bird watching.

To set the record straight, I wish to admit and point out that bird watching and photographing birds in the wilderness has been a time tested hobby which has its intrinsic values and advantages, some of which are:

1. Camping out in open spaces in the forests — "feeling the earth" as Colonel Lindberg describes the joys of camping out.
2. The pleasure is in the chase. Although this saying originated from a hobby of doubtful value, viz., hunting a single helpless fox with several horses and dogs.
3. The joy of achievement, described by Ballard, the famous psychologist as the one joy that never palls (satiates). A good photograph or a good film made of birds in the wilderness is something to be proud of.
4. Recording on film or viewing flights information of migrant and local birds against the background of an evening sky, and so forth.....

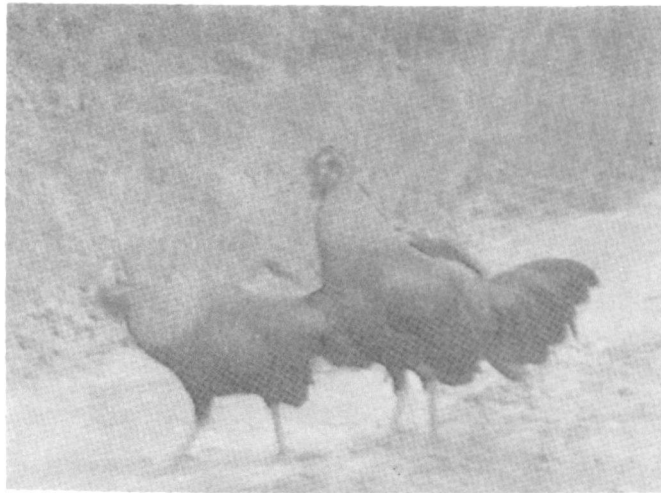
"An Evening of Bird Watching" — by Mr. G.M. Henry in the LORIS of June 1974, Vol. XIII, may be cited as an example of leisurely bird watching in the wilderness.

Mr. Roger Toy Peterson's bird watching at the Lila Acheson Wallace World of Birds' may be cited as an equally good example of the other type of Bird Watching in Walk-in-Aviary.

Both aspects have to go hand in hand to form a harmonious whole of bird watching both for enjoyment and for contribution to a study.

There are, of course, subsidiary aspects which involve seeing, hearing and feeling the unusual objects observed. Such situations are rare. I would like to furnish two examples.

1. Observation of breeding parakeets in a private indoor Aviary with limited facilities:



“Nothing can describe the confusion of thought I felt as I sank into water”.

Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*.

The antithesis of this feeling I glimpsed when one evening, resting in my arm chair opposite the Indoor Aviary which formed part of my long verandah, I heard the first chirp of the young chick of a ring necked parakeet, within seconds of it getting out of its shell. I was able to examine immediately the naked young one with its eyes closed by withdrawing the wooden nest box with its stepping block and a flatter block with a concave cavity for eggs.

Nothing can describe the joy I felt when I heard and saw the event which included an opening in the second egg breaking and exposing a curved red beak.

The nestbox was modelled on the design given in Spratt's Booklet on Budgerigars — a publication from Australia, where budgerigars are found in their natural state.

To encourage the parakeets to lay I gave them peanuts ad lib and their favourite fruit known as Kovvai Palam, shaped like a Dubai Pumpkin, but very such smaller in size. The fruit has a beautiful colour combination with a fine shade of red on top merging into green below. The over ripe fruit is completely red. The beauty of the fruit is such that the name Kovvai Palam occurs in Tamil lullaby's used for putting to sleep babies in arms. The creepers bearing these fruits are found all over Sri

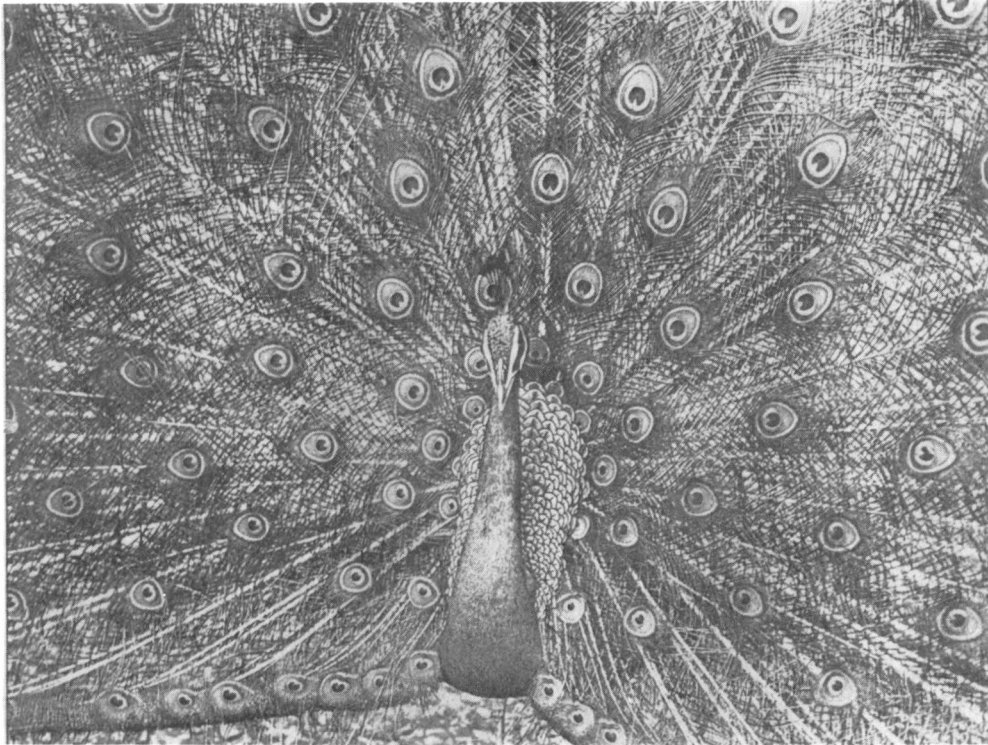
Lanka. It is used with other edible leaves for making Kola Kanda. I used to collect these fruits on my rounds.

Sunflower seeds meant for exotic varieties like the Blossom Headed Parakeets and Alexandrine Parakeets which were also occupants of the same Aviary were also available on a Bird Tray inside the Aviary. Cuttle shell bones collected on the beach were also in the Aviary to help in the formation of egg shells. Food like cake or boiled rice from the food table are not at all suitable for breeding parakeets, as such items will inhibit laying propensities.

The other song birds in the Aviary burst into song when I switched on the overhead light inside the Aviary. This was the counter part of the Joy of Achievement which an observer in the wilderness experiences after successful photographs or wild life films.

The second experience of a subsidiary aspect of bird watching is set at the historic Thiruketheeswaram Temple, then (1960) at the zenith of its restoration undertaken by the Temple Restoration Society headed by Sir Kanthiah Vythianathan. This also occurred round about the same time as the event in the first example of Parakeets. Both Mannar Town in Mannar Island and Thiruketheeswaram on the mainland were part of the same Administrative Division of which I was in charge.

One Friday when I went to the Temple, Sithamparapillai Pandaram (garland maker) informed me that the Peahen reared in the Temple,



had laid a cluster of eggs near the Murukan shrine and was brooding over them. He was afraid to go near. I went up and lifted the Pea fowl wings when lo! and behold! — mirabile dictu (wonderful to relate) young chickens with feathers on wings, freshly hatched, started gamboling in and out of my palm.

Peafowl chickens and jungle fowl chickens are born with wing feathers formed to ensure safety in flight from lesser predators like mongoose, snakes,

jackals etc. On subsequent visits to Thiruketheeswaram Temple, I had seen Sithamparapillai of a late evening herding the mother peahen and growing chickens into an enclosure for the night. To conclude I would like to quote Sri Lanka's Director of the Wild Life Department indicating a shift in policy echoing new trends, the world over.

“Moreover, we must make people part and parcel of conservation, and make them understand why it is necessary”.