

THE INDIAN COURSER IS ON UNCERTAIN GROUND

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The Indian courser, a bird of dry open land, at Mamandur in Kancheepuram. Photo: Rama Neelamegam

When parents pop out of sight, an infant has trouble believing they have not disappeared forever. As it grows in days, the infant totters on to an understanding of “object permanence”, learning not to equate “popping out of sight” with “going out of existence”.

The problem arises when infants that have grown into adults fail to unlearn the lesson of object permanence in certain situations. If something — and someone — keeps popping out of sight far too often, and pops back in only after a dreadfully long passage of time, it may actually be disappearing from the scene. Not with a bang, but with a series of inscrutable budes.

Applying this logic to wildlife conservation, wildlife ecologists can sometimes get overly optimistic about a species’ resilience, believing it exists in the same encouraging numbers, ignoring growing evidence that it is checking out of many of its known habitats. Talking of a specific case, there is evidence that it is time to such shed misplaced optimism about the Indian courser (*cursorius coromandelicus*).

The Indian courser is found across India in patches of suitable habitats. Though still described “widespread” and of “least concern”, the bird puts in rare appearances in many of its known habitats. In Chennai and surrounding districts, Indian courser’s occurrence data is patchy, being occasionally reported from lake beds (when they had become dry), the most notable example being Siruthavoor.

With the Indian courser, ornithologist V Santharam employs unminced language one wants to hear more often.

“The Indian Courser is one of those species likely to become hugely uncommon and disappear in the next few decades. It has already become uncommon in many areas. Because, open areas are places people think should not be left open.” The Indian courser is viewed as a ground bird, because it largely sticks to *terra firma* even when it perceives a threat to its safety. Its “fleeing” behaviour shows this bird bets on its wings as well as its legs to carry it to safety — more on the latter. The Indian courser belongs to the category of birds that make short work of nest-building. The nest is just a scrape in the ground.

Its preference for open, dry land is what puts the bird at a huge disadvantage. Because, it is just the kind of earth that turns the eyes of “development”, eyes that view fallow lands as waiting to be “put to good use”.

“These birds like open lands, open dry river beds, lake beds and open stony dry country,” points out Santharam. “The Indian Courser is receding because it prefers open areas which are sparsely populated and less disturbed.”

On the subject of how the Indian courser is being squeezed out of its habitats, the ornithologist presents a snapshot of a pre-monsoonal Pallikaranai from the 1980s.

“We have seen the species in Pallikaranai Marsh. Those days, you would be able to spot it right from the road (which would later go on to become the Pallavaram-Thoriapakkam 200-feet Radial

Road.”

The natural water-flow movement of the Marsh existing at that time provided a conducive environment for the Indian courser during certain months of the year. “In those days (just as now), the Pallikaranai area would be inundated up to the road during the monsoon. But the difference is that once the rains stopped, the water would start receding. There would be these areas along the road, for at least up to 300 metres on both sides, that would be covered with slight grass in most parts and be slushy in some parts. Overall, it would offer a more dry kind of habitat for months. When the water was down — as I have seen in the months of September and October before the monsoon arrived — the Oriental pratincoles would come. So would the Indian coursers,” explains Santharam.

He then goes on to present the prevailing situation. “But now, there is water logging through the year, changing the quality of the habitat. Reeds are found right next to the road. In those days, reeds would be seen only half a kilometre away. When the section got developed, the character of the place changed. The water would not flow that freely and started stagnating and reeds also started coming up close to the road.”

“The Indian courser is one the most neglected and least studied birds,” says S Balachandran, deputy director at the BHNS Regional Migration Study Centre in Point Calimere. “It is not a common bird, and over 40 years of field studies, primarily across Tamil Nadu, I must have had only 10 sightings of the Indian Courser. In the Tirunelveli side, in a dry area, I had seen one or two Indian coursers. Other of the rare sightings I have had of this species include the ones at Kaliveli and Kodiakarai. Going by the Tamil Nadu experience, the bird is scarcely found. As the bird prefers neither wetlands nor forests, and is a species of dry open land, surveying it can a challenge. Being found in barren and dry grassland, this bird suffers directly from development activities. It is affected just as the yellow-wattled lapwing is, which is also a bird of dry open land.” While according due importance to the role of citizen-science efforts to document sightings of species like the Indian Courser, Balachandran punctuates the necessity of carrying out a sustained study of the Indian courser.

(‘Uncommon Resident’ discusses resident birds of Chennai and surrounding districts that are not easily seen, and may be dwindling in numbers)

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