

A raptor in the bird bath

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16, Kirimandala Mawatha, Nawala,
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Just only two decades ago, Kirimandala Mawatha was a little known pathway in Nawala, which itself was then a rural area barely emerging from its cinnamon and rubber estate origins. Its main claim to fame was the Milk Board which was situated at its Narahenpita end, which was joined to the Nawala end, by a traditional "edanda" - a coconut trunk bridge - over which people walked in single file. That was when we first occupied our modest house at one end of which stood a tall pine tree. Today despite the ravages of time, and the "politics of development", the pine tree thankfully, still stands, nevertheless, the road itself is busy with noise pollution, traffic dust, and of course air pollution.

However in June, our lives took on an unexpectedly interesting turn. We noticed a pair of birds nesting at the top of our pine tree. We realized that these were no ordinary birds like those that usually nest in our garden. They had hawk-like beaks. A "Rajaliya", claimed our driver Nandana - himself a rural bird lover and quite a knowledgeable one. A "Rajaliya" is building her nest up here, confirmed the other Nandana, our long standing daily-retainer, now almost a house incumbent.

It seemed like a hawk as the bird rested in the far off Kadju tree, and a nearer "Ehala" tree. Now, Marina, the zoologist in the family, confirmed driver Nandana's and his namesake's observations. It was definitely of the raptor family. Close observation was not possible for some weeks as the birds moved in and out unostentatiously. Only the bundle of sticks at the top of the pine tree, which was the nest they had constructed, was clearly visible. Photography at that stage was not possible as our camera, a digital auto focus, had no manual override and, tended to preferentially focus on the spreading foliage.

Soon the baby birds had hatched out of their eggs and there were cries of the babies, and evidence that the parent birds were carrying food to them. We observed that there were frequent trips by the parent birds from our neighbour's Kadju tree next door to their nest on our pine tree.

By July, we observed that the baby birds were being



Raptor enjoying his bath

taught to fly, by their parents. The first journey was from their pine tree home, to the nearest branch of the Kadju tree in our neighbour's Garden. The frequent cries of a distinct sharp "Kwweek kwweek kwweek" were now familiar to us and a welcome signal to run out to the garden camera in hand.

At last we were able to sight the baby birds as their mother accompanied them flying from tree to tree, on a regular basis. Within a week, the babies were able to take solo flights from the pine tree to the kadju tree and back.

Occasionally they would rest on the nearby telegraph pole but not for long. In time they would venture out to the antenna nearby. First on our TV antenna, then onto the neighbour's TV antenna, and finally onto the one beyond. They would venture with the familiar cry of "kwweek, kwweek", on their outward journey at around six thirty, in the morning and return at noon.

The next foray was around four in the evening and returning around six-thirty.

Their cry was now familiar to our household. The birds were now venturing out regularly, but the heights of the poles on which they rested and the distances, coupled with the fact that views were always against the light, made picture taking difficult. Our telephoto capability was insufficient for a good picture of the birds. We were certain, after consulting our books that it indeed belonged to the raptor family, but what exactly the species was, remained the question...

It was September and the birds were journeying for longer periods leaving earlier and returning later than before. They were able to fly for longer hours and reach wider ranges in distance.

One fine day we found one of the birds perched by the high water-tank in our garden. However it moved away soon. Perhaps our non-interference made the juvenile bird even bolder. On September the 14th he came on the framework of our water tank again, and spotted our bird bath by its side. He dipped in and that gave us the chance for a series of photographs at comparatively close range - at least within the range of our camera's telephoto capability. The raptor was finally "trapped", without his knowledge, or more appropriately one could say, he seemed not to care. He enjoyed his bath, got onto the framework again, and spotted a roach on the ground. We watched as the bird swooped down with alacrity, and gripped his prey, before mounting back on the framework. Slowly, ate his prey, and departed.

Subsequently we made some estimation, as regards the size of what was indeed a juvenile specimen of the species. Our bird bath was 47 centimeters at its diameter, and, it appeared (from our photographs), that the bird would have been around 35-37 centimeters in length.

After that final day we heard the familiar, "kwweek kwweek" no more. But with the photographs, the next step was the exact identification of the species. Having tried ourselves, with our several bird books without any definite success, we took the easy way out and telephoned Professor Sarath Kotagama, who willingly obliged us by giving us a prompt appointment. At the department of Zoology, there was the new Ornithological Unit. We were enthusiastically received by the Professor, (who was very easy to identify, with his gorgeous beard!), and his youthful group of ornithological students and colleagues. Swiftly several books were



Raptor on the scaffolding of our water tank

whipped out and after some deliberation the raptor was identified as a juvenile "Shikra" or in technical terminology, *Accipiter badius*. The brilliant photograph by Chitral Jayatileke in Siyoth, the Journal of the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka, helped to finally clinch the issue.

We were given the latest edition of the Pictorial Guide (book 1) Common, Endemic & Threatened Birds in Sri Lanka by Sarath Kotagama, autographed by the author, as well as a copy of the new Journal of the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka, Siyoth.

Reading through this excellent journal in its first volume and stirred by the article by Mahendra Siriwardhane entitled "Observing a Lot: Writing little", we were encouraged to write our observations and send our photographs to the journal .

References

1. Kotagama , S.K & Fernando. P. (1995). A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka... Wild Life Heritage Trust. Sri Lanka 1995.
2. Jayatilake, C. (2006). Raptors of Yala National Park. Syoth. J. FOGSL. 2006, 36.

Photographs by: R.O.B. Wijesekera