

Unusual roosting behaviour in purple coot*

Porphyrio porphyrio poliocephalus

Rex I. De Silva FZS. MIBiol.

On 18th October 1980 at around 1800 hrs. the writer, Arjun Guneratne and some members of the Sri Lanka Natural History Society were passing through the flooded swamp at Bellanwila (actually abandoned paddy fields, 70deg 50' 20"E, 6deg 50' 30"N) when they made a rather unusual observation. Several Purple Coot *Porphyrio porphyrio poliocephalus* were perched apparently at the tops of some reeds in a nearby reed-bed. As the reeds appeared to be too slender to hold the birds without swaying, bending or breaking, there was some mystery as to the manner in which the coot were supported. The onset of darkness however prevented any closer investigation at the time. The writer and Guneratne returned to the site on 25th October and carefully surveyed the area through binoculars. At first no birds were seen, but it was observed that the tops of several clumps of reeds had been converted into platform-like structures. Towards dusk (c. 1830 hrs.) about a dozen Purple Coot made their appearance and began to clamber up the reeds on to the platforms where they appeared to roost. Each platform was occupied by a single bird.

We revisited the site on 1st November to make a detailed study of what we had begun to refer to as "roosting-platforms". We found that each of these was constructed by bending over and entangling together the branched tops of several adjacent reeds in a roughly circular area of approximately 50cms diameter. As the tops of the reeds had been pulled inwards (i.e. towards the centre) the more or less circular platforms were only about 30cms across. The larger basal area probably contributed to the stability of the structure. These platforms were at heights varying from 66 to 101cms (average 81cms) above the water level. The depth of water at the time was approximately 23 to 30cms. But would have been somewhat greater during our earlier two visits. Heavy excrement was found on the platforms, but the dry condition of the droppings indicated that the structures had been abandoned by then. This was confirmed as the birds did not



* Purple coot is presently called Purple Swamphen

return at dusk. It is perhaps relevant to emphasize that that these "roosting platforms" were definitely not nests.

Discussion

The exceptionally heavy rains experienced from August to early October 1980 had flooded the area and the birds probably constructed the "roosting-platforms" as a protection from nocturnal aquatic predators. The writer scrutinized all the reference works on Sri Lankan and Indian birds in his library, but could find no mention of this phenomenon. He therefore wrote to (the late) Major W.W.A. Phillips requesting his opinion. Major Phillips replied that he had never encountered "roosting-platforms" and was unaware of any references to them in the literature. He agreed that the birds probably constructed these as a means of protection from nocturnal predators. Subsequently the writer's attention was drawn to Cramp & Simmons (1980) who report the construction and use of platforms for sunbathing by Purple

Coot. These platforms may be similar to the "roosting platforms" observed by us although they are used for a very different purpose.

Samples of the reeds used in construction of the structures were taken to the University of Colombo where they were identified as a species of *Cyperus*. The writer thanks Arjun Guneratne for joining him in making the observations. He is also grateful to [his daughter] Annemarie De Silva for the illustration and Priyantha Wijesinghe for drawing his attention to the reference on sunning platforms.

References

Cramp, S. and Simmons K.E.L. 1980. Handbook of the birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palaearctic Vol. 2. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

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Fonny de Fonseka