

The birds are back



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Homecoming (Above) The Birds of Tiruvannamalai book cover; (top) A racket-tailed drongo Special Arrangement and KR Deepak

Birds of Tiruvannamalai - A Guide Book describes the afforestation efforts that led to bringing over 200 species of birds back to the Arunachala Hill

Naturalist and teacher Arun Venkatramanan faced a rather wonderful statistical problem while working on *Birds of Tiruvannamalai*. In one of the earlier drafts of the book, 158 bird species were recorded to have returned to the area in and around the Arunachala Hill in Tiruvannamalai.

“I was ready with the book two years ago but each time we thought we were done, we’d discover some more species. By the time we went to print, it had risen to around 200. By the time we were ready with the first print, the total had gone up to around 204,” says Venkataramanan, sharing the afforestation story at reStore, Kottivakkam recently.

All this is the result of human effort, says Venkatramanan; a hill which formerly had just 30 species of birds now includes species such as Brahminy Kite, Common Kingfisher, Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Eurasian Spoonbill and many more. “I’ve been observing the hill right since I was a child. It used to be barren without a single tree on it. But the transformation it has witnessed in these 30-odd years is remarkable. We often find no room to plant new trees now.”

Venkatramanan and his team planted around 15,000 trees a year. But with limited water resources and unpredictable rainfall, the task of regrowing a mini forest has been anything but easy. “What we did was to dig up hundreds of pits on the hill, just in time for the first rainfall of the season. After that, we would plant as many as 2,000 trees a day in that small window before the monsoon started in full swing. If these trees survive beyond the first summer and the attacks from deer and porcupine, we know they will last longer. Looking at the numbers, if one tree survives for every 100 we’ve planted, we call it a success.”

Things are looking much better now and Venkatramanan adds that his team is left with just 10% of the planting. “The rest are taken care of by birds, who eat the fruits and spread the seeds.” The water bodies in around the hill too have flourished bringing home another set of birds and animals.

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The book is priced at Rs. 250 and is available at www.theforestway.org.