

Environment

Racket-tailed drongo to Marshall's Iora, birdwatchers document new species in TN

The Forest Way, a charitable trust in Tiruvannamalai, has identified and documented several new species in the region in a book titled The Birds of Tiruvannamalai.

- [Anjana Shekar](#)



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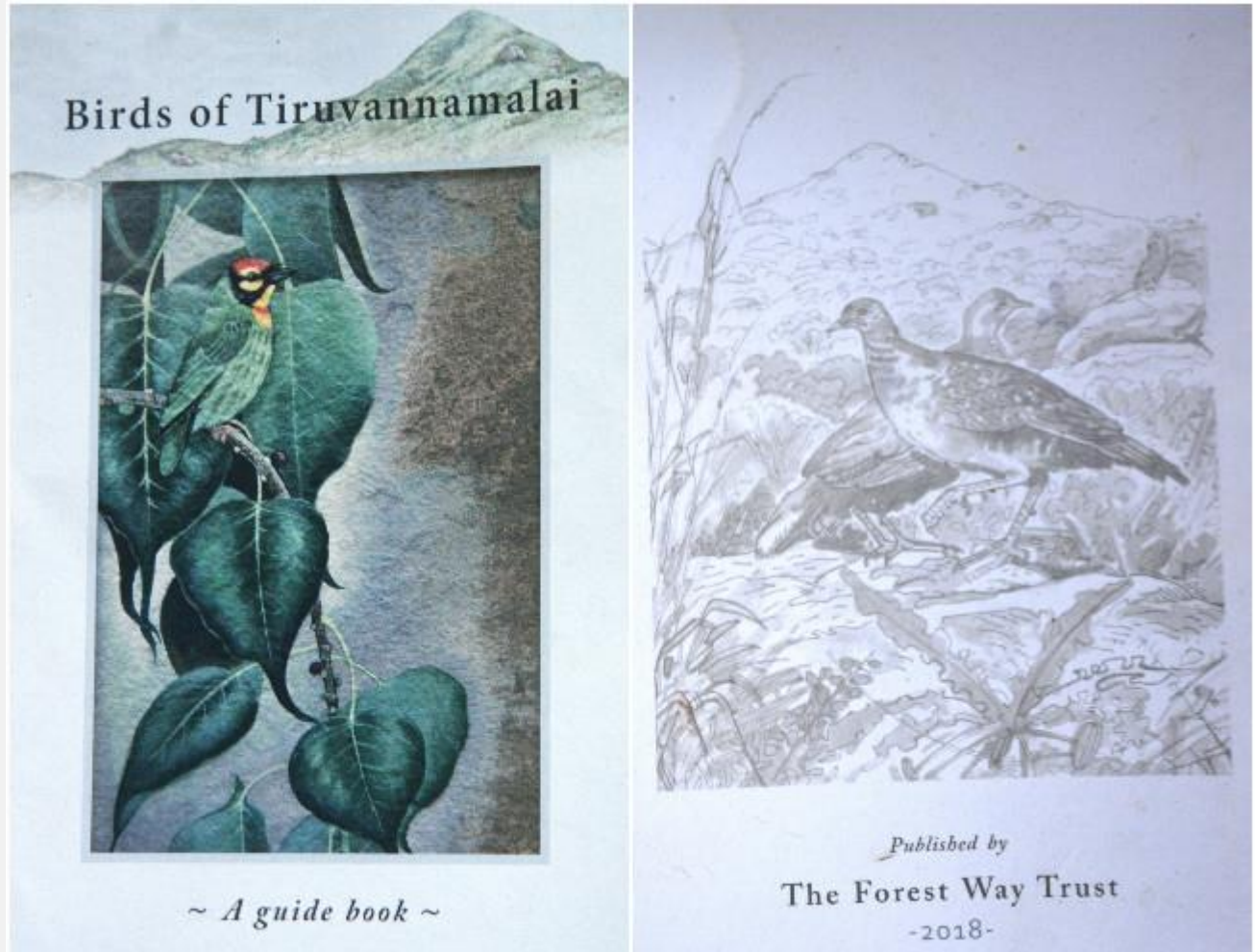
There is something magical about a lush landscape that is blessed with clean waterbodies, animals grazing along unfettered and birds chirping back home.

But at Tiruvannamalai, there's more to this than meets the eye. The brown and barren scape of Arunachala hills in Tiruvannamalai has undergone a sea of change in the last 30 years thanks to the early efforts of the Annamalai

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Reforestation Society, founded by Apeetha Arunagiri in 1988, and followed by the Forest Way, a charitable trust based in Thiruvannamalai, founded by V Arun, Akila Balu and Govinda Bowley in early 2000s.

And this is what the Forest Way chronicles in their recent-launched book, *Birds of Tiruvannamalai*.



This interesting collection of 204 bird species, most of which are new to the locality, is quite incidental, says Arun. “We have been recording birds informally for quite some time now, but efforts to make it into a book only began a couple of years ago,” he adds.

Arun recalls that when they started the project, Tiruvannamalai had around 50 different bird species.

“Tiruvannamalai had a range of birds, but not on the hills. The forest species and water birds near the hill today are completely new,” points out Arun.

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ASIAN PALM SWIFT *Cypsiurus balasiensis*

12cm Resident

A small, rather plain sooty-grey bird with long forked tail (usually closed, but very obvious when the bird is banking in flight) and long slender bow-like wings. It has been spotted around most lake ponds and farms. It is usually seen in scattered groups flying over open country and cultivation where there are toddy palm trees. It is inseparable from these trees in which it roosts and nests. It spends the day hunting tiny winged insects in the vicinity of the palms, turning and twisting in the air, and uttering its shrill triple note call *ti-ti-ai*. It lays its eggs in a tiny half-saucer of feathers and down stuck together with the bird's saliva and attached to the underside of the palm leaf. It roosts in furrrows on the underside of a leaf, clinging on in an upright position.



LITTLE SWIFT *Apus affinis*

15cm Resident

A small, smoky-black swift with a white throat and rump, short square tail and long narrow wings. It is a widespread, common resident, and although it can be found around ruined buildings and cliffs, it is equally at home in areas of habitation including large cities. It is very gregarious and can be seen flying at high speeds throughout the day, feeding on flies and midges which it catches in its very wide mouth. Swifts cannot perch normally, only clinging to rough surfaces. Except when at the nest, they are in the air continuously, sleeping 'on the wing'. The flight is very swift - a few rapid beats of the wing, followed by swooping glides, with agile twisting and turning. They may be seen chasing each other or gathering together up in the sky, uttering shrill, peeping notes. The nest is constructed of grass and feathers glued together with saliva, and usually attached under the eaves of houses, arches or bridges. They may be built in colonies, often repaired and used year after year, with birds returning to the same nest. So-called 'house swallows' have been known to be occupied for over 80 years.



BARN OWL *Tyto alba*

36cm Resident

A medium-sized owl with a large white facial disc surrounded by a ring of stiff feathers. It has golden-buff and grey upperparts, stippled with black and white, and silky white and buff underparts, which are spotted dark brown. It is often to be seen in and around deserted, ruined buildings, either alone or in pairs. It is only active at night (partly to avoid being mobbed by crows and other birds if it shows itself in daylight hours) and spends the daytime dozing upright in a dark corner of a ruin, ancient tree, or roof. It emerges at dusk with a harsh, prolonged screech, then flies silently in search of its food: mainly rats and mice, but also small birds and bats. Its call can be a mix of harsh screams and hissing notes. It nests in hollow trees, buildings and ruins, and will use the same site year after year.



COLLARED SCOPS OWL *Otus bakkamoena*

23-25cm Resident

A small owl with distinctive, horn-like ear tufts. It has grey-brown upperparts, spotted with white, and buff underparts streaked with black and brown. It can be seen in forests, and in wooded areas including orchards and gardens, alone or in pairs. It is only active at night and hides in tree hollows and thick foliage during the day. It feeds mainly on beetles and other insects. Its call is a monotonous *woo* repeated at short intervals throughout the night. It nests in a natural hollow in tree trunks or the disused nest-hole of a woodpecker or barbet. This bird has been seen near the Skandashram trail and near farms.





In fact, the numbers seem to be on the rise. “Between the period of proofreading and printing the book, we documented six species. After printing, we identified two more species - the Northern Goshawk and the Marshall’s Iora. In fact, the Marshall’s Iora is rarely found in the country and is quite uncommon to spot it,” explains Arun.

This group of amateur ornithologists, armed with only a basic camera, lens and binoculars, referred to a plethora of books and took assistance from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which is heading an eBird project, to identify these birds.

“Much of the efforts for this book has been put in by Kumar, who has illustrated all the birds and heads our bird watching trips. He has also painted all the species on slabs at Arunagiri children’s park, for the children,” says Arun.

Every bird has a story

While it has been a gratifying experience for many, Arun says that there’s a story behind every bird species they have spotted.

“I’ve seen the racket-tailed drongo in many places before; in fact, I almost missed spotting it here. It was only after returning home that I recalled seeing it. The drongos such as the spangled drongo, white bellied drongo and racket-tailed drongo are new to the region,” he elucidates.

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Another interesting observation he shares is having spotted seagulls around the mountains in eris like Keezhnathur and Samudram. “Though only for a brief period, I was surprised to find sea and shorebirds here.”



In January 2016, the group was in for a treat. “A couple of hundred Rosy starlings had migrated here from Europe and we were able to witness their murmuration. It was a terrific sight,” says Arun, adding that the team also spotted a strange visitor - a chestnut headed starling.

According to Arun, if one has enough patience that birdwatching demands, he/she might actually find that these birds have quite extraordinary characteristics and are distinct from each other. “The Clamorous Reed Warbler has a fascinating story. These birds are silent in this region but mimic the sounds they picked up here, once they fly back home,” he smiles.

The book is priced at Rs 250 and is currently available at reStore and OFM stores in Chennai.