

Afforestation and conservation efforts by the Forest Department and NGOs have turned the Tiruvannamalai hill, once a shrub jungle, into a mixed deciduous forest with a remarkably positive effect on the region's bird population.

In the early 2000s, barely 50 bird species were recorded in the 10-km region around Arunachala, the revered hill behind the famous Arunachaleswarar Temple. Now, the number has increased four-fold to 204 species. A new publication, *Birds of Tiruvannamalai – A Guide Book*, two years in the making, offers detailed documentation of this phenomenon.

A record

“We have even spotted the racket-tailed drongo, which is a thick forest species. Even after compiling the book, we have continued to observe some species that weren't seen before, like the white-tailed Marshall's iora,” says V. Arun of the The Forest Way, the charitable trust behind the book. “In 15 years, we have achieved a record.”

The positive impact of the improved green cover includes the rise over this time in the deer population in the area from a mere eight to over 300, and the sighting in Tiruvannamalai of birds normally seen in the Javadhu Hills, over 80 km away. Birdwatcher, artist and photographer R. Sivakumar, who has provided the rich visuals in the book, a labour of love featuring both photos and paintings, says the substantial reduction in forest fires on the hill was a key factor in the replenishment of bird species.

Afforestation efforts, which began in the late 1980s, focused on native species of trees and shrubs. “There are around 10 fig tree species native to the hill. When we planted saplings, we also nurtured species that germinate naturally on the hill,” said Mr. Arun, adding that better cameras and binoculars also play a role in birding.

Curbing forest fires has had a salutary impact as well. “Unlike in other forest areas, fire in the Thiruvannamalai hill is caused mostly by humans. People burn shrubs in the belief that it cures stomach ailments. Sometimes, fires are caused by devotees who burn camphor during the Karthigai Deepam festival,” says Mr. Sivakumar.

He adds, “Two water bodies — the Notchi Malai lake and the Keezhathur lake — though polluted, offer refuge for water birds throughout the year.”

As the book shows, Tiruvannamalai now welcomes resident and migratory birds, as well as passing avian visitors.

Priced at Rs. 250, it may be ordered from www.theforestway.org.