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PLUS

Attidiya: A sanctuary in the city

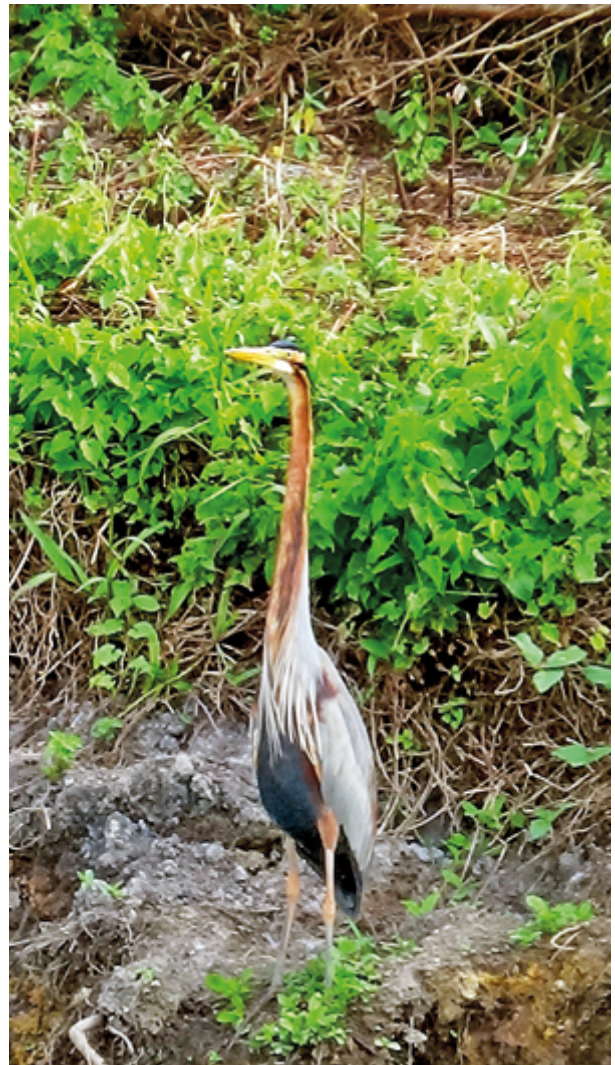
By Alan de Costa

View(s): 194

I started out after dawn. I live for part of the year in a small lane on the eastern side of the Attidiya road. It is but a short walk to the canal and the periphery of the sanctuary. Today I am equipped with a Sony hand held video recorder. It is really quite high tech for me, but I am getting the hang of it. It has not rained for the past few days, remarkably, and the muddy patches on the canal bank are edged with crumbling clay.

Straight away, I see a white breasted kingfisher, followed almost immediately by the jewelled flash of the Common kingfisher. I walk slowly toward the Ratmalana end and plan to cross over the bridge, past the beautiful little shrine and around to the main public park. But there is plenty to see right here.

I make it three kingfishers with a good view of a Pied kingfisher. He didn't tarry, and I was unable to capture him on camera. My good friends the Purple heron and his elegant cousin the Grey heron did not disappoint, and I collected some good images. The usual clutch of Open billed stork, and a single White necked stork were noted. Up in the air were some Painted stork studying the terrain before committing themselves to the ground. Both Greater and Lesser Cormorants, Egrets, Pond herons, and a Night heron scuttling into the mangroves added to the list. The corps of Blue tailed bee eaters is as always, happily buzzing around. They seem to be perennials now rather than migrants. A pair of Blue coot step from pad to pad of a crimson lotus. From some distance away, I hear the roars of the resident troop of Purple Faced Green Leaf monkeys.



I stop briefly and write it all down. I have recorded 15 species of bird in less than 10 minutes! Putting my notebook away, my gaze focuses briefly on the ground, and behold, I find a single quill of a porcupine.

I eventually get to the Belanwila Road and cross over onto the lakeside walk and pick up speed. It takes me 20 minutes of vigorous walking to circumnavigate the lake. While I do this, I add a pair of Pelicans, a Darter and a monster Kabaragoya. Red wattled lapwings, Ibis and the Common moorhen are added to my list. But I am irritated by a lack of discipline which diminishes my list, as I have not specifically recorded those birds that we take for granted.

My family moved from Colombo to this area in the late '50s. Our first home was on the western side of the Attidiya Road, a newish sprawling ranch house with a verandah and front lawn separated from rolling paddy fields by a low wall. It was idyllic. We watched the seasons pass, the steady pace, and ritual of paddy cultivation, and happy and industrious young men and women who were our friends. I soon learned to put on an *amudai*, and was out in the mud learning what I could. 'Twas bliss to be alive. I also became quite an expert fisherman, and was soon ranging around the whole area. The Attidiya lake was of course then an enormous shallow reservoir connecting with the Bolgoda lake. The causeway that connects Kawdana Road to the Attidiya Road was commenced at about this time. The first job was reclamation of land for a road to be constructed. This seemed to take forever. But eventually the job was done, setting the pattern for things as they are today.

The idyll could not last, and I remember the very moment when it passed. Right up at the Ratmalana end of the lake was a beautiful little stream bounded on the west by what was a coconut estate. The stream had large numbers of small yellow fish called Kaha-Ralli, and they could be easily taken on a small hook with a grain of rice. A couple of dozen, spiced and fried, was a treat. On this day as I came to the stream, I noticed a black curl in the water. It lengthened and twisted and slowly dissipated downstream. But I followed it back to a thick rivulet of black effluent discharging from a new built factory on the estate. There were no fish around there anyway, and I fished elsewhere.

The next weekend I returned to a scene of devastation. The whole waterway near the estate was turned to sludge and smelled terrible. It seemed not long after that the happy cycle of paddy farming began to wobble and eventually cease. The problem may have been a lack of drainage or indeed salination. But I am clear of a temporal relationship between the black stuff and the end of farming. It is now of course a major suburb spanned by the Wattarapola Road.

I returned home and brought out my father's old autographed copy of Henry's Guide to the Birds of Ceylon (1955). It is heavily annotated, and full of inserts and cuttings.

On page 70, is a beautiful drawing by Henry of the Racquet tailed drongo. Annotated in the margin:

" saw at Wilpattu with the Vollmars 16-1-75"

"Kiri KemaOkanda, August 28 1976"

"Seen by Alan in Uda Walawe on 8/1/98"; "splendid view from the verandah at the Lahugalla bungalow 24/9/78";

On the opposite page 71, comments relate to the Ashy Swallow Shrike.

" very common on the electricity wires across our paddy fields"; "Generally seen in Mid May during the SW Monsoon 15/8/77"

"These birds though resident seem to disappear from the paddy fields but appear again round the middle of July."

The paddy fields referred to, of course, were those in front of our house. My father was a keen birder, and had a beautiful war surplus pair of small Zeiss binoculars. We travelled right across the island, across jungles and plains, in the marshes, and concealed in hides, while the old man made notes in his book. A great number of the observations come from right here in Attidiya.

I left Ceylon in 1967, and have returned as a visitor since. The entire suburb of Attidiya attracted population and development on an unprecedented scale in the decades between 1970 and 1990. Major flooding was a fact of life during this period. It seemed inevitable that the whole place would eventually drown, or be reduced to a series of mudflats, tenements and slums.

Just over a hundred years previously the City of Paris was in a similar predicament. It was filthy, unsanitary, and subject to successive cholera epidemics. Infant mortality was close to 50%. Regular insurrections took place as people took to arms in despair. Napoleon the Third appointed Baron Haussman as his civic engineer, commanding him to bring light, air and beauty to the city. A series of acquisitions, demolitions, drainage works, sanitation systems and brilliant engineering over a decade and a half, produced the Paris we know today- The City of Light. Neither was this a painless exercise, as Haussman reported only to the Emperor. He was no democrat.

About 10 years ago, major engineering works were commenced. Initially around the Attidiya Lake large channels were dug and enormous concrete pipes placed. The area behind the Belanwila temple was landscaped and the new lake was formalized. The canals were widened and deepened, and there does seem to be a commitment to a continuous programme of keeping the canals free from Salvinia and Nile Lotus. Flooding is no longer an issue.

We now have a beautiful National Park, the Attidiya-Belanwila Sanctuary. Right on my doorstep as well. I hope over the years it can even improve. I could imagine boat trips for bird lovers with knowledgeable guides. Perhaps an elevated walking track in the middle, accessible only by boat. There are many possibilities. But it remains an engineering, environmental and aesthetic triumph. Somebody thought it through, gathered the resources and the political will to achieve this. Somebody got it right. Good government is a thing to behold.

(The writer is Prof. Surgery/ James Cook University, Cairns , Australia)

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