

A bird that changed a canal's course

In 1836, T.C. Jerdon, a 25-year-old surgeon, arrived in the Madras Presidency. After training at the General Hospital, he was sent to treat troops battling insurgency in a district nearly half-way to the Calcutta Presidency. Once that was quelled, he joined his cavalry regiment as medical officer and served in various parts of India in a three decade long career. But why do we care about yet another employee of the East India Company, even if he had died insolvent at the end of his service?

Here's a reason: At least a few species of plants, animals and birds of the Indian subcontinent are named in his honour. Among them are the Indian violet (*Jerdonia indica*), the Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jer-*

doni) and the Anchor Catfish (*Hara jerdoni*). But one cryptic bird, endemic to the Eastern Ghats, popularly known as Jerdon's Courser, has to be the most famous of creatures named after him.

For a quiet bird, it has seen plenty of drama. In 1848, the curator of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Edward Blyth, declared *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*, a species new to science based on Jerdon's specimen. By the turn of the 19th century, this bird was declared extinct. So, when it was unexpectedly sighted in 1986 there was much rejoicing. The Indian government promptly put its image on a Re 1 postage stamp. It was also given a place to call home, the Sri Lankamalleshwara Sanctuary in Andhra

Pradesh, but its travails didn't end there.

A threat loomed over the bird's habitat in the form of the Telugu Ganga project under which interlinked canals would carry water from a reservoir in Andhra Pradesh to our ever-parched city. This would have passed through the courser's home, so that route was avoided. Researchers then showed that the bird's range, though narrow, extended well beyond the sanctuary. So, in 2008, the Supreme Court ordered the drawing up of an alternative route for the canal and this was a victory for the conservationists. Grazing, logging, and quarrying are persistent threats to the bird's habitat. There are less than four hundred Jerdon's Coursers left on the planet. The last time someone officially sighted one was in 2009.

In the early 19th Century, this courser was not critically endangered like it is now, but the bird must've been elusive just the same. The nocturnal bird hides in the shade of the scrub during the day, but Jerdon procured the bird, and described its call for posterity. As a student at the University of Edinburgh, he had belonged to the Plinian Society (Charles Darwin himself had been a member), an association of young naturalists, a students-only club that met weekly, critiqued papers, took trips to the countryside, collected and identified specimens using rules of taxonomy. That training paid off, when Jerdon came to a country, most of whose flora and fauna had not been documented systematically. Since



T.C. Jerdon's...

... Courser



there was no single collective account of the birds, he began recording the ones he saw and heard in the Eastern Ghats and the Deccan. This formed the basis of his first book *A Catalogue of the Birds of the Peninsula of India*. After four years of such fieldwork, plus official duties, he went on leave of absence to the Nilgiris, where he got married at the age of thirty to Flora Macleod, who had an interest in botanical art.

His next stop was Nellore, where he served as Civil Surgeon. Here, Jerdon drew on the knowledge of the aboriginal Yanadis to catalogue reptiles and more avifauna. Later, ants and fish were objects of his study, but he never lost sight of his beloved birds. He observed them at his own expense and made sketches or hired a local draftsman for the job. Expeditions into the jungle and commissioning illustrations cost money. The good doctor's finances were never in order, creditors harassed him, but he

seems to have taken it in his stride. Once, when he served in Tellicherry, a bailiff from Madras came to arrest him, and the story goes that the man was sent back with a specimen of a rare monkey (*Presbytis Johnii*) – a live one at that!

Rejoining the army with the rank of Surgeon, Jerdon did active military duty till the end of 1857. By then, the amateur naturalist's fame had spread. His services were transferred to the Government of India on special duty to prepare major works on Indian natural history. In *Birds of India*, he described 1,008 species spread over the length and breadth of the country, which he traversed and re-traversed during the course of this work. On one of his excursions into the jungles of Assam, he caught fever. After convalescing, he returned to England in 1870, where he died two years later leaving a wealth of drawings and specimens of tropical plants, birds and animals.

Jerdon had laid the groundwork for other naturalists in India. For zoologists going out into the field, his reasonably priced books served as the starting point. A.O. Hume, 'Father of Indian Ornithology' and a founder of the Indian National Congress, too acknowledges this debt in *My Scrapbook or Rough Notes on Indian Zoology and Ornithology*, which he dedicates to Edward Blyth and Dr. T. C. Jerdon, and calls himself their pupil.

He hoped that this book published in 1869 would form a "nucleus round which future observation may crystallise" and also that others would help him "fill in many of the woeful blanks remaining in the record." They did. They still do.

And so science marches on.
– Vijaysree Venkatraman

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committee of three members, namely Andrew Scott, Collector of Guntur, John Read, Collector of Masulipatnam, and I.L. Caldwell, Superintendent of Tank Repairs, regarding distribution of water from some channels of the River Kistna (Krishna) to the villages of Bapatla and Chukur (Cherukuru). The copper plates are secured by a ring, the ends of which, interestingly, have a figure of Ganesha!

Such an array of ancient copper plate inscriptions is rare to see. I wonder how many in Chennai even know about this gallery?

Answers to Quiz

1. He was awarded the prestigious 'Fields Medal'; 2. Ebola virus; 3. Vistara; 4. Comet; 5. World War I. It's a garden of ceramic poppy flowers; 6. An AV museum chronicling the history and treasures of the highest office of the country; 7. P. Kashyap, by winning the men's singles gold at the CWG; 8. Natwar Singh; 9. Robin Williams; 10. Inauguration of the Panama Canal.

* * *

11. M.A. Muthiah Chettiar, M. Ramanathan Chettiar and M.A. Chidambaram; 12. Thomas Parry; 13. Underground sewage; 14. Subramania Bharati; 15. Fig (or Athi). The area is Athipet; 16. *The Colonel's Lady*; 17. Henry Cowell; 18. Robert Chisholm; 19. T.P. Rajalakshmi; 20. Longest song, set to 108 ragas and talas.

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