

Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera* and Asian Palm Swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis* – predator and prey together in a Palmyra Palm tree

Ashok Mashru: A-7, Alap Heritage, Kalavad Road, Rajkot. mashruashok@gmail.com



On 26 February 2019, Raju Karia and I were on routine bird watching near Nyari-I Dam, Rajkot. We observed a pair of Red-necked Falcons (*Falco chicquera*) perched on a ca. 50 feet high Palmyra Palm tree (*Borassus flabellifer*) but could not take good photographs as it was very late in the evening. We also observed Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*) flying around the tree and going in to the tree. I visited the same place on 9 March 2019 with Divyesh Ghervada and Hemanya Radadiya, to get good photographs of the falcons in morning light. I also observed the falcons chasing away a Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) coming towards the tree. I again noted Asian Palm Swifts going inside and coming out of the Palmyra Palm even though the falcons were present on the tree. I took many photographs and seeing those photographs on a computer after reaching home, I found one nest built in the center of the palm tree, beneath where the falcons were perched.

Afterwards, on 31 March 2019, Divyesh Ghervada called me and sent a photograph showing the adult falcon and 2 or 3 juveniles roosting on the tree near the nest. It was confirmed that the nest was of a Red-necked Falcon and it was breeding in the tree. I visited the place again, with Raju Karia, to see the falcons on 17 April 2019 in the evening. We could not see any bird on the tree but after close observation, we located four birds perched on fencing poles of a farm near the palm

tree. One bird had a kill in its feet. We observed that it was the adult pair with two juveniles. They suddenly flew away and started chasing each other in sky. It looked like adult was teaching chasing to the juveniles! The birds then perched on a nearby *Prosopis juliflora*. We went to the site again on the next day in the evening. I observed that the adult bird was flying towards the palm tree, carrying food for juvenile birds. On this day, we went very near the tree and saw two grown juveniles perched on the palm. But, we noted with surprise that the Asian Palm Swifts were also flying around and visiting the tree and carrying out their regular activities.

There are two aspects to these observations which are very interesting:

- 1) During the course of our visits over two months, we never observed the Red-necked Falcons chasing, attacking, or feeding on the Asian Palm Swifts despite their presence on the nesting tree, very near to the nest of the falcons. Naoroji (2006) noted that this falcon preys on swifts; so swifts are a part of their diet but the author does not specify any specific swift species. A literature search showed that in Africa, the previously conspecific but now treated as a distinct species, the Red-headed Falcon (*Falco ruficollis*), was observed preying on African Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus parvus*) and a pair was also observed attacking a swarm of swifts (de Baerdemaeker 2018). While I could not ascertain whether the palm tree was used as

only a roosting site or it was a breeding site also for the swifts, it was certain that the swifts continued using the tree despite the presence of the falcons. The relationship between predator and prey in this instance is not understood; was it any kind of symbiosis? What benefit did both these species get from one another? Or was it simply a case of the falcons tolerating the swifts in their neighborhood? Why would the swifts continue to use this tree when their predators were nesting there? I searched on 'Google scholar' extensively but did not find any reference or observation of these two species inhabiting the same tree.

2) The choice Palmyra Palm as a nesting tree by the Red-necked Falcon is unusual. This species does not have any specific tree preference for its nesting and it is regarded as unspecialized in its nesting choice (Naoroji 2011). A nesting of this falcon in a Palmyra in the Union Territory of Puducherry was discovered in January 2016; this was the first report of the Red-necked Falcon nesting in a Palmyra from India (Lekshmi & Boobalan 2018). However, this species has been observed breeding on Palmyra in Bangladesh (Foysal 2015) and the Red-headed Falcon in Africa has been reported breeding on a Palmyra (Osborne 1981). Thus, this is only the second report of the Red-necked Falcon breeding on a Palmyra Palm in India.

Both the above observations are unusual. The breeding biology of the Red-necked Falcon in India has been widely reported in the recent years (Naoroji 2011, Vora *et al.* 2017, Lekshmi & Boobalan 2018) and it has also been seen nesting on electricity pylon (Mori 2018). However, the nesting on a Palmyra and that too with the Asian Palm Swifts in the same tree, is very interesting. I visited this tree again in November 2019 but did not find the falcons or the swifts there. On 25 February 2020, I visited the palm tree with Neel Sureja, Hemanya Radadiya, Raju Karia and Taej Mundkur. We saw the falcon pair in the tree and could observe some part of what seemed to be a

new nest. At around 18:00 hrs, we saw some palm swifts, going out and returning back in the same tree. A local farmer had informed Neel that this pair was being seen in this tree for 8 years now. Thus, it seems that the falcon pair is regular in this tree and the palm swifts are also resident in the palm tree. A unique situation where the predator and prey are living in the same tree!

Acknowledgements

I thank Divyesh Ghervada for contributing photographs and Raju Karia, Hemanya Radadiya, Neel Sureja and Taej Mundkur for their company.

References

- de Baerdemaeker, A., 2018. Red-necked Falcons *Falco chicquera* hunting at a roost of African Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus parvus*. *Scorpus* 38 (2): 21-22
- Foysal, M., 2015. Observations of Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* (Aves: Falconiformes: Falconidae) nest at Keraniganj, Dhaka, Bangladesh, with a focus on post-fledging behavior. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 7 (5): 7138–7145
- Lekshmi, R., & Boobalan, S. 2018. The Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* Daudin, 1800 (Aves: Falconiformes: Falconidae) breeding on Palmyra Palm at Bahour Lake, Puducherry (Pondicherry), India. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 10 (3): 11416–11422
- Mori, D., 2018. Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera* nesting on an electricity pylon. *Indian BIRDS* 14 (3): 88–89
- Naoroji, R., 2006. *Birds of prey of the Indian Subcontinent*. Om Books International. New Delhi, India.
- Naoroji, R., 2011. Breeding of the Red-headed Falcon *Falco chicquera* in Saurashtra, Gujarat, India. *Forktail* 27: 1–6
- Osborne, T.O. 1981. Ecology of The Red-necked Falcon *Falco chicquera* In Zambia. *Ibis* 123 (3): 289–297
- Vora, G., Chauhan, F., Shah, Y., Thoria, V. & Jadeja, S., 2017 Observations on breeding of Red-necked Falcon near Surendranagar. *Flamingo* 15 (1): 1–5

Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* pair successfully fledging a chick at Thol Lake, near Ahmedabad, with help of local farmer community

Kandarp Katju: 10, Sarathi Society, Ahmedabad-380052. kandarp2002@gmail.com

The environs of the Thol Lake, near Ahmedabad, have a rich agricultural base that has traditionally sustained waterfowl and other avian populations. From paddies during the monsoon months providing post-harvest fallen grains to resident and incoming wintering birds, to the subsequent wheat crop that too caters adequately to the needs of migrants returning to their breeding grounds, the agro mosaic offers a classic example of how the needs of waterfowl and terrestrial birds are being met in the framework of a larger lake ecosystem.

Large, contiguous tracts of paddy cultivation around Thol Lake due to ready availability of rain water from the lake, greatly augmented in the recent years by the Narmada Canal waters, provide suitable nesting habitat for the Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone*). Annual records of three pairs, having carved out distinct territories within the ca. 500 acres of cultivation, have been maintained by me over nearly two decades of monitoring.