

Why should a birdwatcher be over-concerned about the species of trees being planted? Surely, if there are plenty of trees birdlife would increase. Unhappily, it is such naivety among moot naturalists and all citizens that has resulted in the near collapse of populations of several of our bird species that were plentiful even a couple of decades ago. Birds are rather sensitive to changes in their habitats and this should not be surprising when we consider that they, as an animal group, have so very high metabolic rates.

In the small sanctuary at Hingolghadh we have two species of minivets, the small and the white-bellied. While the former is more of a generalist and can be found from the edges of evergreen forests right into thorn jungles, the latter is a distinctly open country species preferring stretches of grasslands interspersing copices of thorn and dry deciduous trees. Its distribution is consequently more patchy. It was while photographing the two minivets that the late Durbar Saheb Shivraj Kumar and I noticed the food selection for the nestlings – the Small Minivet brought beakfuls of small insects and soft grubs that are found among foliage of trees while the white-bellied almost exclusively reared their young on slender green grasshoppers that infest stands of fresh grass. At times they brought along slender green caterpillars, again found among the grass. Well preserved grasslands, understandably, are essential for maintaining healthy populations of White-bellied minivets. If the grasslands are overgrazed, even if trees are present, the chances are the species will be lost. At the other extreme of the Small Minivets range in moist deciduous forests, we have the larger brilliantly coloured Scarlet Minivet. This last species disappears if the number of big trees are lost. It is by preference a forest species and no doubt, its food would be insets of moister regions specially infesting large trees. Conceivably then, with the loss of open grassland whether by overgrazing or by trees overgrowing it, we would constrict the White-bellied Minivet's habitat; the removal of tall forest would severely affect the Scarlet's. The generalist Small Minivet would benefit by closing canopy on the drier side of its range and would spread into degraded forest habitat of the Scarlet Minivet.

A very interesting habitat preference for nesting is seen among our various long-tailed (Wren) warblers. The Jungle Long-tailed Warbler builds a loosely woven purse of grass blades among tall clumps of grass. It starts nesting considerably later in the rainy season waiting for the grass to grow, while being more widespread in wetter parts of India it is rather patchy in drier areas preferring taller grasses. The Rufous-fronted Long-tailed Warbler has a predilection to constructing its loosely woven grass nest in short grass, close to the ground among low thorny shrubs. It is a widespread warbler of the more arid



regions nesting almost with the commencement of the rains. The Ashy Long-tailed, and the diminutive Franklin's Long-tailed warblers build woven grass nests as well as stitch broad leaves in the manner of the better known Tailor-bird. Many of the fast growing monsoon weeds have large leaves and so these three species are surprisingly more widespread than might be expected, however, the Ashy has a preference for wetter habitats. In Saurashtra and Kachchh it is rather less common than in mainland Gujarat. According to authoritative books the Streaked Long-tailed Warbler is a denizen of semi desert country with hardly any vegetation. My experience of the species is that, it enjoys clumps of grass on sand dunes on both sides of the Gulf of Kachchh and is also found on islands like Bhydar in the Gulf. The tall grass on Pirotan Island are where this slender little birds with an absurdly long tails should be looked for. The Indian or the Plain Long-tailed Warbler is by preference a bird of reed beds though it finds irrigated millet and sugarcane to its liking and can be found at considerable distances from water. All these resident warblers have been seriously affected by overgrazing, cutting of reed beds and changes in crop patterns. Intensive tilling of land with the destruction of grassy verges around fields along with heavy spraying of pesticides have all contributed to a very alarming decline in number of our warblers along with other species of birds.

The rather thoughtless practice of monoculture plantations often on grasslands has been something we all should have vociferously protested against quite a good many years ago.

During the rainy season all the long-tailed warblers display and call at such frenetic rates as to be intrusive on the least observant, though today one has to make a special effort in finding them! Destruction of habitats by over-grazing and degradation is, to my mind, far less alarming than their alteration by faulty land use and management practices. Degradation is easily understood; changes resulting from management practices take sensitivity and a degree of scientific understanding to recognize. Mass afforestation and other quick-fix schemes call for greater fine tuned planning and execution if they are not to seriously endanger Indian birdlife. □