



The Canal and the Courser

Text & Photographs: P. Jeganathan

An endangered bird, a much-needed canal, and a few suggestions.

After witnessing the gradual destruction of a wildlife sanctuary that is home to the endangered Jerdon's Courser, a BNHS Research Scientist explains why and how, plans for the Telugu-Ganga Canal need to be redrawn.

A walk in the forest at night, at strange hours, is not unusual for me, but for those who fear the dark, it may be. People ask me why I do not fear the dark forest and the animals in it. I tell them that there is nothing to fear. But the forest is no longer safe, even its denizens are threatened. Big, heavy, strong and enormously powerful machines that even I fear, roam in the forest these days. Not only do I hate them, they scare me. Do you know what I am talking about? Bulldozers and excavators. Whenever I see these machines inside the scrub jungle, it is depressing, because they desecrate and destroy the home of the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*).

I have been witnessing the negative impact of these machines ever since I started studying this bird. The sad thing about studying a rare species is that it is difficult to spot it, you can hear it, though not very often, and to find its footprint you need to work really hard. But you can see its habitat, the scrub jungle being destroyed. The Jerdon's Courser prefers to live only in the scrub jungle and day after day this land is being destroyed and reduced, mainly to provide land for agriculture, especially for lemon farming, to the people who have been displaced by floods.

Despite these pressures, the Jerdon's Courser still survives in a few places in and around the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS), in Andhra Pradesh. Initially, it was known only from near Reddipalli village where it was rediscovered. After the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) started studying its distribution, we detected its presence in three new places with the help of clues like its footprints, calls and even direct sightings. But, all these places are in and around the eastern part of the Sanctuary, within 14 km from the original rediscovery site.

Recently, the BNHS obtained permission from the Ministry of Environment and Forests to catch the Jerdon's Courser for radio-tagging, the main objective of our Project. The permission came after four years of persistent follow-up. I reached Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary in the first week of October 2005, very happy and excited waiting to start with fieldwork, but these feelings didn't last very long.

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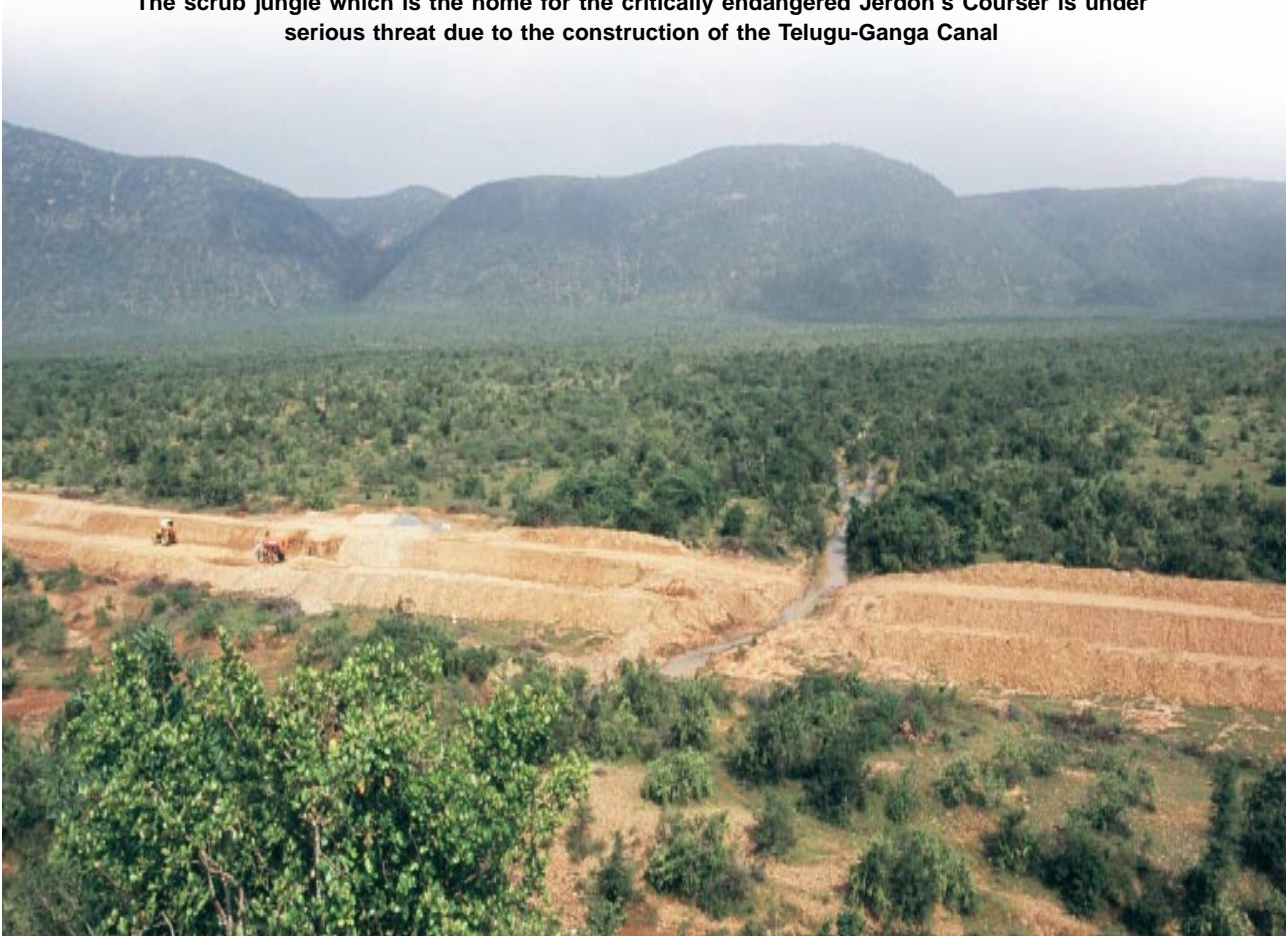
During the third week of October on our way back from our study site, Dr. Rhys Green, from the University of Cambridge, and I saw some heavy vehicles at work in the eastern part of the Sanctuary. My excitement was replaced by depression. We visited the site and found excavation for the Telugu-Ganga Canal had begun again. We informed our Director, Dr. Asad R. Rahmani, who immediately notified the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department head quarters in Hyderabad. Prompt action was taken by the Cuddapah Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) B. Sundar. Work on the Canal was stopped and the people involved in the operation were arrested. But a considerable amount of damage had been done by then.

This part of the Telugu-Ganga Canal originates in Sri Potuluri Veera Brahmendra-

swamy reservoir, which is about 25 km north of the Sanctuary. Actually, there are two canals flowing down south that go towards the submergible area of Somasilla Dam. The canal which comes along the eastern side of the SLWLS is referred to as 'Right Canal' and the other canal that runs along the western boundary of the Sri Penusula Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuary (SPNWLS) is referred to as 'Left Canal'. Both these Sanctuaries were declared mainly for the Jerdon's Courser. Sagileru River runs in between these two Sanctuaries.

In 1986 too, when the Jerdon's Courser was rediscovered, the site was under threat because the construction of the Telugu-Ganga Canal was proposed across it. Officials from the Forest Department and the State Government of Andhra Pradesh recognised the ornithological importance of

The scrub jungle which is the home for the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser is under serious threat due to the construction of the Telugu-Ganga Canal



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The Telugu-Ganga Canal has already destroyed considerable amount of potentially suitable scrub jungle habitat in and around two protected areas, which were declared for the critically endangered Jerdon's Courser

the site and declared it as the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary for the Jerdon's Courser and the proposed course of the Canal was adjusted so as to avoid the Sanctuary. The main reason for constructing these canals is to irrigate the fields in the Sagileru River Valley. All for a good cause I agree, but at what cost?

A recent study carried out in and around the SLWLS, shows that the Jerdon's Courser has a strong preference for a particular density of scrub jungle habitat. Nearly 114 ha has been cleared for the construction of the Right Canal around the eastern part of the SLWLS. This resulted in the disappearance of about 22 ha of potentially suitable habitat for the Jerdon's Courser. The total length of the Right Canal, including the area of the forest cleared for further construction in the eastern part of the Sanctuary, is about 13 km. When the canal

reaches the 10.4 km mark it enters the Yerraballi Forest Block, which belongs to the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department. And when it reaches the 11 km mark it passes through the place where I recorded the footprints of the Jerdon's Courser in 2001.

After deploying soil strips, I monitor and record tracks in that place for about a month, to know whether the Jerdon's Courser is there or not. On some occasions the rain destroys all the soil strips, while sometimes livestock grazing in the area foul up the soil strips as well. Whenever I see any shepherds close to the soil strips, I urge them to not bring their livestock to that site and to change their route. But they never listen. I have always disliked them for this reason. But now I realise that they are at least much better than bulldozers and excavators.

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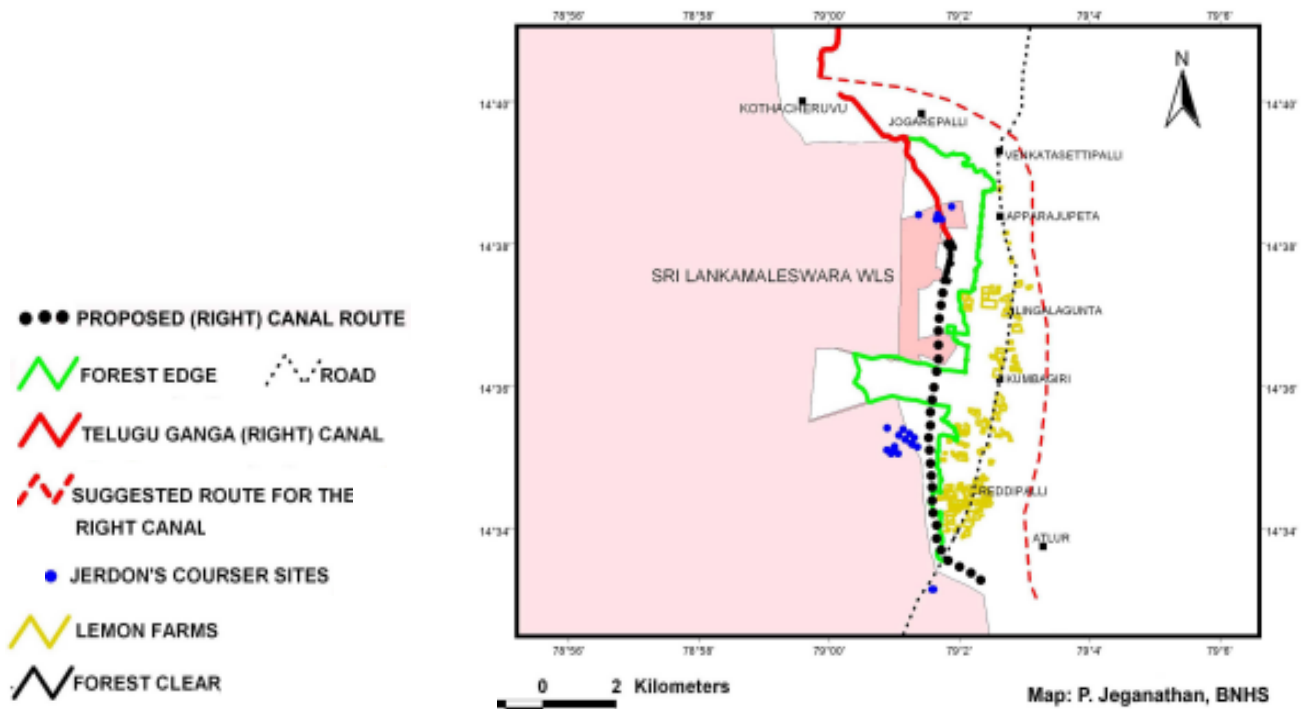


The Jerdon's Courser possesses the highest category of threat for a wild population defined by IUCN — Critically Endangered

“The shocking thing about this Canal construction is that the Telugu-Ganga Canal authorities have not obtained permission for working in the forest from the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department.”

In the very place where I recorded the presence of the Jerdon's Courser there is now a big canal. There is a road. There is a clearance in the forest. And the forest floor is full of the tracks of bulldozers and cattle. The Jerdon's Courser may never come there again.

If water flows in that Canal it will be a lifeline for many. But, for the Jerdon's Courser it will mean death. For me, it will be a wound that will never heal. I have visited that place only once. The beautiful scrub jungle where Jerdon's Coursers love to live now looks like a graveyard, and the Canal the gravestone. I never even imagined that I would see this place in this state and I do not want to go there very often. The destruction has been imprinted in my mind and will never go away.



The Canal route near the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary as proposed by the Andhra Pradesh irrigation department (black dotted line) and the suggested alternative route (dashed red line) by the BNHS

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You may wonder why I am so concerned about this place. That's because this place is close to my heart, because I got the footprint, recorded the call and saw the Jerdon's Courser here after a lot of hard work. And this is the first of three places where I recorded this bird, apart from the known Jerdon's Courser area.

The shocking thing about this Canal construction is that the Telugu-Ganga Canal authorities have not obtained permission for working in the forest from the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department. They have not even informed them. The construction has been stopped temporarily, thanks to the brave efforts of B. Sundar.

One day, I was mapping the Canal route with the Global Positioning System and I must admit mapping habitat disturbances is a painful job. Not only has the habitat been disturbed, while documenting it you will also be disturbed after witnessing the disturbances.

During the survey I was shell-shocked when I noticed a stone mark that said 'TGP – 40 km'. That means if the Canal

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continued, it would reach the 40 km mark at that site starting from the origin. The stone mark is fixed less than 500 m away from the place where the Jerdon's Courser has been sighted regularly ever since it was rediscovered in 1986!

From this place we have seen the Jerdon's Courser on several occasions. We have confirmed the footprint of the Jerdon's Courser, identified and recorded the call of the Jerdon's Courser, we have got the footprint of a young Jerdon's Courser and now we are trying to catch them for radio-telemetry studies. The place has doubled as a laboratory for our scientific studies for the last five years and it is the only place in the world, at the moment, where the

Nearly 22 ha of the suitable habitat of the Jerdon's Courser was cleared near the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary for the Telugu-Ganga Canal construction



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Roads along the Telugu-Ganga Canal would pave way for more illicit woodcutting in and around the Sanctuary area and also facilitate the woodcutters to commute easily

Jerdon's Courser is known to be regularly present.

We are not against this Canal, but at the moment the Right Canal is not in the right direction. Precious scrub jungle habitat extends over the eastern part of the SLWLS as well as outside the Sanctuary. There is a road from Badvel between the forested area and the Sagileru River. There are villages and settlements by the roadsides. Most of the villagers have their fields on the eastern side of this road. So, the Bombay Natural History Society has suggested that the Right Canal be realigned and go to the eastern side of the Badvel-Siddavattam Road. This would avoid destroying the scrub jungle and will also irrigate the area where there are many fields.

If you happen to visit Cuddapah you will be astonished by the number of signboards depicting the Jerdon's Courser. In fact, there are more signboards than known Jerdon's Courser sites at the moment! If our suggestion is not accepted, then the Jerdon's Courser will be seen only on the signboards in Cuddapah.

Action taken

A group of experts from the Bombay Natural History Society, WWF-India and Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh are working together along with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department to lobby the Government of Andhra Pradesh to realign the Telugu-Ganga Canal around the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary. A

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detailed report has been prepared by the BNHS' Jerdon's Courser Project team on the impact of the Canal on the Jerdon's Courser's habitat and has been submitted to Government of Andhra Pradesh. This report can be downloaded from our website www.bnhs.org.



P. Jeganathan, Senior Research Fellow, BNHS, working on the Jerdon's Courser for the last four and a half years in Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary, Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh.



We request members of the BNHS to extend their support by voicing their concerns to:

The Minister of Environment and Forests,
Government of India
Ministry of Environment & Forests,
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Lodhi Road, New Delhi 110 003
Tel.: (91-011) 2436 5633 Fax: (91-011) 2436 2222 (CHECK).
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Email: envisect@nic.in

Hon'ble Chief Minister
Green Lands Circle, Begumpet, Hyderabad 500 016.
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Email: cmap@ap.nic.in

Please send us a copy of the letter, for our record.

SBIADVT