

# Digging a grave for the JERDON'S COURSER

By P. Jeganathan and Dr. Asad R. Rahmani



Six decades ago, Dr. Salim Ali wrote in *The Book of Indian Birds* Perhaps the three rarest birds in India are the Mountain Quail, Jerdon's Courser and the Pink-headed Duck.

All attempts to re-discover the Mountain Quail and the Pink-headed Duck have been in vain. Now we seem poised to squander the second chance we were given with the Jerdon's Courser.

This small, nocturnal bird is still found in the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh, where

it is making its last stand in and around the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS). But for how long?

A small, ground-dwelling bird that hunts between sunset and sunrise, the Jerdon's Courser is named after a zoologist/British Army medical officer, Dr. Thomas C. Jerdon, who discovered this lovely wading bird in central India in 1848. Not one Jerdon's Courser was ever seen after 1900, and the diminutive bird was believed to be extinct until it was rediscovered in 1986 by Bharat Bhushan, a researcher with the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), near the Lankamalai Hill ranges in Cuddapah district.

Endemic to a country where some 13 per cent of the world's birds have been recorded, the Jerdon's Courser clings to existence in a tiny habitat of scrub forest threatened by livestock grazing, quarrying, and canal-building. One of the most serious threats to the Courser's habitat has turned out to be the Telugu-Ganga Canal, an agricultural irrigation project that was initially proposed in 1986. The rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser necessitated an alteration in the original canal route, which starts from the Nagarjuna Sagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve. This is because the canal would fragment and degrade vitally important

habitat and thus sound the death knell for the Jerdon's Courser. Conservationists not only lobbied successfully for the canal's realignment, also persuaded the Forest Department and the Government of Andhra Pradesh to establish the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS), to include the rediscovery site along the eastern fringe of the Protected Area.

Beginning in 2000, the BNHS began a systematic study of the Jerdon's Courser. We were joined in this work by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Cambridge University and by the University of Reading, with the research funded by the Darwin

"At the last hearing on March 11, 2006 at Hyderabad, the state government sought time to examine the alternatives provided by BNHS on the realignment of the Irrigation Canal. The CEC directed that the State Government should decide on the same in four weeks time. In the interim period, there should not be any further construction till the alternative route is worked out. The CEC was also informed that the FIR against the DFO of Kadapa who had taken action against the Irrigation Department has also been withdrawn." – **Ritwick Dutta, Lawyer**

Initiative for the Survival of Species (U.K.) and the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department – a truly unique and global effort to protect an endangered specie.

The known distribution of the Jerdon's Courser in 2000 was a single site just a few hundred metres in diameter in the scrub jungle of the SLWLS. Further studies, however, revealed that the bird could be found in three additional areas, all within 14 km. of the spot where it was first rediscovered. The discovery of the bird's further distribution from the adjacent foothills of Turupukonda range led to the establishment of the Sri Peninsula Narasimha Wildlife Sanctuary (SPNWLS) that spreads across the Cuddapah and Nellore districts.

Jerdon's Coursers have a strong preference for a particular density of scrub jungle habitat. They are most likely to occur where the density of large (over two metres tall) bushes is in the range of 300-700 per hectare, and where the density of smaller bushes is less than 1,000 per hectare. The bird also seems to prefer areas where there are woody plant species characteristic of mature scrub such as *Hardwickia binata*. We estimate that there are about 3,600 ha. of habitat potentially suitable for the Jerdon's Courser, most of it around the eastern part of SLWLS. Much of its habitat lies *outside* the SLWLS, which badly needs protection too.

Considerable progress has been made in developing standard survey techniques to detect the presence of the Jerdon's Courser, to describe its habitat requirements and identify new sites in and around the SLWLS and SPNWLS suitable to the Jerdon's Courser (see *Sanctuary Asia Vol. XXIV No. 1*).

Just as we were celebrating having received permission to use radio-telemetry in our research to know more about this elusive bird, the Telugu-Ganga Canal project resurfaced to undermine our work and the very existence of the Jerdon's Courser. In October 2005, unauthorised work on the canal began around the eastern border of the SLWLS. Clearing of the forest and excavation of channels destroyed an area (inside the Yerraballi Forest Block) in which the Jerdon's Courser had been observed in 2001. We informed the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department and luckily for the Courser, B. Sundar, the Divisional Forest Officer of Cuddapah took action immediately and ordered the construction to stop.

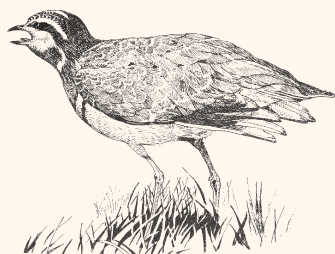
Purposeful campaigning by wildlife conservationists and the BNHS also saw work on another canal along the boundary of the SPNWLS being stopped by the courts. Officials of the Teluga-Ganga Canal project never sought permission to construct canals within sanctuary borders, and have been

Children watch the the construction of the Telugu Ganga Canal project that threatens to wipe out the Jerdon's Courser, a bird that has been celebrated on postal stamps and special seals, but seems not to be valued in truth by the Andhra Pradesh government.





## THE JERDON'S COURSER



The Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus* is a wader in the pratincole and courser family, *Glareolidae*. It inhabits sparse scrub forest interspersed with patches of bare ground. A distinctive bird, the Jerdon's Courser sports two brown breast-bands, a yellow bill with a black tip, a blackish crown, and an orange-chestnut throat patch. In flight, the bird shows a mostly black tail, and a prominent white wingbar. It is a compact creature at just 27 cm. in length. A great deal needs to be learned about the Jerdon's Courser, but it is presumed to be insectivorous, and to feed mainly on termites. Little is known about its behaviour or nesting habits. It is not known precisely how many Jerdon's Coursers there are, but its numbers are estimated at between 50 and 249. It is listed under Schedule I of the *Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972*, and is considered a priority species under the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002 – 2016) of the Government of India. It has the dubious distinction of being on the IUCN's Red List Category for the most critically endangered species in 2005, with a real prospect of extinction in the next few years.

charged with violation of the *Forest Conservation Act, 1980* and the *Wildlife Protection Act, 1972*.

As of now as much as 22 ha. of Jerdon's Courser habitat have been lost in the eastern part of the SLWLS thanks to this illegal canal. In other words, one of the three new sites where the Jerdon's courser has been sighted since 2000 has disappeared.

Though work on the canals has been stopped for now, we must presume it could be restarted at anytime, given the scant respect the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation Department has shown for conservation or the law. And if we allow this to happen, that would place the canal within 500 m. of the crucial site where the Jerdon's Courser has been regularly sighted since the day it was rediscovered. There is no other spot in the world where this beautiful bird can be reliably seen or heard.

Aitanna, a forest guard with the Cuddapah forest division lives in the nearby Reddipalli village. He has probably seen the Jerdon's Courser more often than any other living person. He played a pivotal role in Bharat Bhushan's rediscovery of the bird in 1986, and clearly remembers the day he met the late Dr. Salim Ali, who came to Reddipalli



soon after the rediscovery of the Jerdon's Courser to help fight for the realignment of the Teluga-Ganga Canal, and the establishment of the SLWLS.

When this bird is the pride of Andhra Pradesh, why is it still so difficult to protect this rare bird?" Aitanna asks. And we have no ready answer for him.

Sanctuary readers can help ensure a peaceful refuge for the beautiful and rare Jerdon's courser by writing to the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Send a polite letter asking for 1) the realignment of the canal constructed around the eastern part of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary; and 2) that the sanctuaries be enlarged to incorporate important Jerdon's Courser habitat currently on the fringes or outside their borders.

Scrub jungle with open areas are the preferred habitat of the Jerdon's Courser. Explosives blasted the hillock to cut the canal thus damaging the critically-endangered Jerdon's Courser's habitat.



P. JEGANATHAN

