

BIRDS IN A DURBAN GARDEN

by L. Gibson

These notes are about the birds and plants (and some other creatures) in our large garden in Durban, Natal, South Africa. Our lasting impression of Durban was of the year-round plethora of flowering shrubs and trees and these contributed in no small way to the variety of birds and butterflies on the property. The limiting factor to the plant life, and therefore to some extent the bird life, was salt spray, for we were just a short distance from the beach.

The property was situated at the highest point of a seaside ridge and the tallest things visible from downtown, were our two large Norfolk Island Pines *Araucaria heterophylla*. To the front was the sea, while the back overlooked a small valley. When the Brazilian *Tibouchina* was flowering, the sea of purple and pink which covered the far slope of the valley created an unforgettable view. At the bottom of the valley was a wild, bush-covered park. Later, a golf course was built on half of it but it remained ecologically friendly.

The lot was enclosed at the front and back by walls, bordered with *Hydrangeas* on the street, or seaside, and by a line of heavily-berried Pepper Trees *Schinus molle* on the inland side. Both ends were demarcated by a thick Brazilian Cherry *Eugenia uniflora* hedge. Half of the area was left completely uncultivated, with paths mowed through the long grass. The front bore the brunt of the salt-laden, southerly gales, but the downhill side at the back was more sheltered, creating several distinct micro-climatic areas.

Numerous trees, included the aforementioned Norfolk Island Pines, date palms - with fruits edible only to birds - mulberries, guavas, papayas (pawpaws), two very large flame of the forest *Erythrina* spp. and an 18ft (5.5m) *Ficus elastica* - the potted Rubber Plant of more miserable climes. There were also several wild or accidental trees, such as the 'lucky bean' with its decorative but poisonous black and red seeds, as well as a fair-sized strangler fig. A Natal Plum *Carissa grandiflora* provided tasty fruit as well as an impenetrable thorny haven for nesting birds.

Flowering shrubs and plants abounded. Notable were large coastal aloes, said to grow only within the salt spray, a clump of giant *Strelitzia* and thick stands of ginger with very tropical-looking flowers. Frangipanis *Plumeria*, *Oleanders* and 10ft (3m) Poinsettias added further colour and there were numerous vines, including edible passion fruit. Banana plants were liberally sprinkled around but their roots were invariably eaten through by Mole

Rats, causing the plants to crash over if anyone leaned against them. All these, yet the salt spray limited the number of species which could be grown there!

On moving in, the first birds we saw were the human-tolerant residents. The most obvious was a pair of Indian Mynas *Acridotheres tristis*. These are a widespread introduced nuisance, just as they are in Hawaii. They also have a foothold on Madagascar and are found on other islands between Africa and India. They did, however, keep sparrows away from the garden. The mynas came down, along with a few other birds, every time bread was put out, which was quite often, as we found it coarse and barely palatable because it contained a high percentage of maize flour.

The male myna was easily recognised on account of its noticeably darker head and bigger wattles. The pair foraged solely in the garden and included in their territory the strip of *Hydrangeas* between the wall and the roadway. They nested in a hole above an upstairs window of the stone-built house and usually raised two broods a year. Although they laid four or five eggs, they seldom succeeded in raising all of the chicks to maturity. Often, one of the brood would be limping because of rickets and during one particularly dry year, only a solitary chick survived. Because of the relentless drought (we arrived midway through a ten year one) insects were not always plentiful so, in spite of objections on ecological grounds, we fed the adults on bread every day one season and they produced four broods and a total of 15 young fledged.

Every summer the newspapers contained stories of 'vicious' mynas dive-bombing children who passed too close to the nest - just as they published tales of 'vicious' Vervet Monkeys threatening players on the local golf course.

The mynas earned our grudging admiration as they swaggered around in charge of their territory and chased away larger doves. Our back door was always left open, and they became so bold that they took to coming in to raid the dog's dish and sometimes flew right into the kitchen. We went off them when, on one of these kitchen forays, on the way out they snatched up our daughter's pet Dwarf Chameleon and fed it to their chicks. A Death's Head Hawkmoth, a bat with a 1ft (30cm) wingspan and snakes were among other creatures which came in through the back door.

Other obvious garden residents were the doves. Every morning we were awakened by the pleasant 'cooing' of a pair of doves calling from their warming perch in the Rubber Tree. In the summer, this unfortunately meant a 4.15am reveille, for no one in South Africa had the wit to introduce daylight saving time. The doves were among the five species that vied for the bread hand-outs and they all became relatively tamer so much so that the dog, whose hobby was chasing things, often came close to catching them.

Two pairs of the large Red-eyed Doves *Streptopelia semitorquata* nested in the heavily-spiked date palms at opposite ends of the garden. When coming and going from the nest, they made a 'meow' so like that of a cat, that it was a long time before we found that it emanated from the doves. In the breeding season, the males developed a powder blue patch on the back of the head and neck, one bird being particularly brightly marked.

A pair of the smaller Laughing Doves *S. senegalensis* held the ground between the two pairs of Red-eyed Doves. They all bred at any time of the year but especially during the winter. Both species built only in spiky plants, *S. senegalensis* using thorny *Bougainvillea*, sparsely-spined lemon or the unassailable Natal Plum. The nests were the usual flimsy collection of twigs, yet unlike some others, they were never blown down. On these rimless platforms, the plump squabs were sitting targets for Boomslangs, the local highly poisonous tree snakes, the males of which are green and the females brown.

Although normally vegetarian, both species of doves ate 'white ants' (termites). The opportunity to do so arose four or five times a year, during the amazing termite irruptions. In spite of the tirelessly repeated statement that these insects only swarm after rain, the local termites did so day or night, without regard to the weather or season. In areas of perhaps half a square mile (1.30km sq), millions would simultaneously emerge from the ground. When this happened during the day, birds and lizards threw caution to the wind and settled on roadways to gorge themselves on them, and the doves were always present at these feasts. As cars were usually unable to pass by while the termites were flying, the roadway diners were never in too much danger. When the swarms emerged and flew round the street lamps in the evenings, large bats replaced the birds and big toads took the place of the lizards. One night thousands of termites came up inside the aviary and the birds ate so many that they could barely get off the ground for the next week. The termite swarms are a boon to aviculturists, for a bucket can be filled in a minute or so, and the contents frozen and used later.

More retiring, but seen at feeding time, was the resident pair of Black-eyed Bulbuls *Pycnonotus barbatus*. One always kept watch while the other hopped clumsily on its short legs to the food hand-out. When they were not feeding on bread crumbs, they could be seen gorging themselves on the little dates, with the improbably large stones. Or, they could be seen desperately trying, unsuccessfully, to swallow the Brazilian cherries, which were too large for them to swallow whole, or eating large numbers of unripe, spiny Castor Oil *Ricinus communis* berries, blissfully unaware of castor oil's reputation! Bulbuls were the only birds to eat these.

The Black-eyed Bulbuls usually raised their brood of two chicks in the Pepper Trees, probably because the small red berries were a convenient

source of food, as were the *Lantana* berries below. The broods were always successful, save for the odd loss to a tree snake. The old nests of not very securely anchored fine grasses, were always blown out of the trees when the gales came. This bulbul has a rather miserable, limited call of three or four notes.

The fifth species to come for the bread was that accursed, cosmopolitan nest-pirate, the common House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* - enough said!

The above were year-round residents, whereas a number of others came to nest in the garden, some doing so regularly. Prominent among the latter was a pair of weavers, either *Ploceus velatus* or *P. cucullatus*, which in spite of usually being colonial nesters, returned every year to nest by themselves in the same palm by the kitchen door. This triple-trunked tree with wicked 4in (10cm) spines, was shared with one of the pairs of Red-eyed Doves. Many of the palm fronds collapsed while still green and had obviously been eaten through. One day, when standing beside the tree, we heard chewing sounds and on digging into the stem with a screwdriver, found a number of huge Rhinoceros Beetles.

The male weaver always built several nests and slept in one of them. A more substantial nest was made for raising a family, one with a 6in (15cm) long, loosely woven, downward pointing tube, with the nest chamber at the top. Construction was of fine, 12-18in (30-46cm) long strips, neatly peeled from the edge of a palm leaf and hung from the tip of a frond by a few knotted strands. The nest chamber was lined with down and grasses but the tube was unlined. All the nests lasted until the fronds fell (which they did annually) and until this happened, it looked as if there was a small colony of weavers present.

The kitchen was on the first floor at the back of the house, on a level with the top of the palm, and the birds could be seen entering the nest. This was done by flying quite fast towards it, then turning upwards. At the last split second, the wings were folded and the feet drawn up, and the momentum usually carried the bird to the top of the tube.

When displaying to his mate, the black and yellow male hung upside down beneath a nest and flapped his wings. Apart from a buzzing call at this time, the pair was quiet, in great contrast to the very noisy weaver colonies in the area. After breeding, the male lost his black and yellow plumage and the pair hung about with some companions, but were never away from the garden for long.

In the late winter or early spring (there was not much difference between the two) the leafless *Erythrina* trees burst into flower. Their spectacular large scarlet blossoms attracted many birds which gathered to partake of the nectar. There were the bulbuls and, rather surprisingly, also the mynas and occasionally the doves. The most regular feeders were the sunbirds - and the weavers!

The garden was the centre of the very large territory needed to provide fruit for a family of six to ten Speckled Mousebirds *Colius striatus*. They were plain, dull brown, with no speckling. The much-repeated suggestion that the name mousebird comes from the fact that these birds 'creep around like mice' is, in my opinion, ludicrous, for neither of these creatures creep.

There was an annual race between us and the birds to harvest the exquisite Natal plums. Every day they would peck a test hole to check if a fruit was ripe, so usually we had to content ourselves with half-eaten, though still delicious fruits. The birds also competed with Vervet Monkeys for bananas, guavas and papayas. While the monkeys struggled unsuccessfully to carry off large ripe papayas, throwing sprigs to distract our enraged dogs, the mousebirds sat calmly on the fruits, in all sorts of gymnastic positions and gorged themselves. The monkeys always came back later to carry away the papayas once the birds had reduced them to more manageable sizes.

The mousebirds also ate the Pepper Tree berries but never ate anything very hard, unless one includes the dates, which they swallowed whole, stones and all. They ignored the cherry tomatoes which grew in wild profusion, leaving the monkeys to make off with the unwanted produce. The Brazilian cherry (which has no connection with our northern cherries) has an astringent quality and, like the Natal plum, can be eaten only when it is fully ripe. It is an acquired taste to which we became addicted. This fruit also appealed to the mousebirds which ate large quantities of it. As a single small tree held about 6,000 cherries though, the loss was not noticeable. Another favourite was the *Lantana* berry. This introduced pest ran riot on every piece of unused ground and a large patch grew just over the back wall and provided a bonanza for many birds. As the greater part of the mousebird's diet was made up of introduced plants, we wondered what they used to eat before these were brought to South Africa. When fruit was out of season, a year-round staple was papaya leaves. In captivity, mousebirds in Canada ate large quantities of *Weigela* leaves. When we tasted papaya leaves, we found that they have an awful, bitter taster just like the *Weigela*.

The habits of the wild Speckled Mousebird are virtually identical to those noted for the Blue-naped Mousebird *C. macrourus* living in aviaries. Like the latter, they are silent, save for an alarm call. Sand-bathers, they were only once seen to make use of water. After some flowers were watered, they spread their wings and wiggled about on the wet flowers and leaves. Oddly, this behaviour was also recorded only once in the aviary.

The Speckled Mousebirds nested in the Natal Plum and sometimes in the 'cherry' hedge or the Pepper Trees, where their ten day incubation period did not prevent predation by Boomslangs. No doubt tree snakes had

an influence in the development of this short incubation period, just as their presence must have pressured mousebird chicks to leave the nest well before fledging and clamber about among the foliage. The mousebirds, along with the Laughing Doves, seemed to suffer most from predation by Boomslangs. Though this may simply have been because their nests could easily be seen from the kitchen windows and their predation was therefore more easily witnessed. These pencil-slim reptiles could glide through the hedge with remarkable speed and grace and though thorns did not seem to bother them, the nests in the spiky Natal Plum bush were less troubled than others. The mousebird chicks' habit of leaving the nest prematurely, meant that they often had to be rescued, and it was not uncommon for Speckled Mousebirds to be kept as pets.

The dull, greenish-grey Cape White-eyes *Zosterops pallidus* were near-permanent residents. A pair always nested among the lower branches of one of the Norfolk Island Pines. Like the mousebirds (and as noted in the aviary), the chicks invariably left the nest several days before they could fly. This often resulted in them being caught and kept by children as 'pets'. However, unlike the frugivorous mousebird chicks, the insectivorous *Zosterops* chicks soon died.

When, during the breeding season, a path was being cut in the grass below the pines, the parents' alarmed whistles caused the landscape to explode with chicks fluttering in the air, then disappearing out of sight again, at which point the mowing was stopped. The white-eyes sometimes pecked small holes in the fruit to sup the juice but could scarcely penetrate deep enough to do any real harm and preferred to feed where the fruit had already been damaged by the *Colius*. Otherwise, they ate quantities of *Lantana* berries and, of course, insects. Their flimsy, cobweb-bound nests were always the first to be blown out of the trees.

Incorporating our grounds in its large territory was the Black-collared Barbet *Lybius torquatus*. The dual calling of these attractive red-faced barbets is a well-known sound. The loud call is started by the male and finished by the female. However, we are sure we heard a single male, which had lost its mate, make both calls - perhaps the only time this has been noted! They always called from a concealed position and stopped if they thought they were being watched. They use a most unbirdlike little growl to communicate at close quarters. Their saw-toothed bill is used like a can-opener to tackle tough fruit rind etc.

Nest-boxes were put up all over the place, but the only occupants ever seen were an occasional surprised little snake and geckoes. Ignoring the boxes like the rest of the birds, the Black-collared Barbets enlarged a rotten area in a small avocado tree. It never fruited because of the salt-laden air, while others produced fruit just a short distance inland. The entrance tunnel to the nest was 1¾in (4.5cm) in diameter and 1¾in (4.5cm) long. Half of

this length projected as a lip above the chamber, which was pouch-shaped, 8¼in (21cm) deep below the lip, with an average width of 3¼in (8cm). The width was governed by the fact that the nest was in a limb barely 4¼in (11cm) across. The nest chamber came to a rather abrupt, natural point, filled to a depth of 1in (2.5cm) with rotten wood dust. Three white eggs were laid and the chicks were fed mostly on large insects, gathered from the foliage of nearby trees by the parents, who hunted together and kept in constant contact with each other. These shy birds were never seen to forage on the ground and they never left or entered the nest if they suspected anyone was in the vicinity.

Occasional Nesters

One summer, the drought broke, though only temporarily, as usual. The grass immediately sprouted and reached 3ft (92cm) tall and there was a heavy crop of seeds. There was a corresponding influx of seedeaters into the area, one of which was the Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*. This little bird built in the grass at the foot of a small guava tree, in the unmown part of the garden. The grapefruit-sized, tightly constructed nest had a complex, closed entrance of interlocking grass stems. This was situated at the top and resembled the tuft of fibre on the end of a coconut. If disturbed, the female exploded out through this, pushing the stems apart as she went. They immediately closed behind her and it was a mystery how she managed to get back in, for the stems would not part, unless pulled open.

On the side of the nest, near the top, was a little opening, leading to a tiny chamber - a so-called cock's nest. But the male was never seen in this, no matter how often it was examined, in fact, the male was never seen at all. The entrance to the main nest could even have been via this side chamber, through a reverse grass-lock. The complicated entrance was likely an anti-snake strategy, with the dead-end side entrance perhaps a further attempt to frustrate these reptiles.

The six eggs all hatched and the chicks soon filled their private little nest chamber until eventually only two would be uppermost at any given time. Maybe at this stage the female slept in the annex. Anyway, the system worked, for none of the chicks were smothered and all fledged successfully.

Several species of sunbirds were frequent visitors, especially to the winter-flowering, long-tubed, red aloe flowers. Juvenile sunbirds spent all winter in the garden. Most days, one of these streaked, greenish birds could be seen hunting assiduously for spiders along the lower branches of a Norfolk Island Pine. They proved impossible to identify and always disappeared before getting their adult colouring.

As spring approached, the young males began to make courtship flights. They rose from a pine branch and with their beaks pointing skyward, spiralled up for ten to 15ft (3m-4.6m), before stalling and returning to the same perch. We were never sure whether this was just for practise, or if one of the watching, identically garbed birds was a female.

Once only, a Black (or Amethyst) Sunbird *Nectarinia amethystina* came to nest. It made three attempts to hang its pendulous home from the bottom branch of one of the *Araucarias*. The unpredictable southerly gales - up to 90mph (145 km per hour) on occasions - were the reason for sunbirds not breeding in the garden, for their hanging nests needed a sheltered environment. Three times the nest was blown down, before the bird 'wisened-up' and built it at the back of the aviary.

The 18in (46cm) long structure hung by only two or three slender grasses which were interwoven with others to hold the tiny globule nest, suspended 1ft (30cm) below. The delicate little nest chamber was made from plant down, bound with cobwebs. It had a side entrance with the merest entrance platform and tiny awning. Grasses hung underneath and tapered off in a mirror image of the top. The whole structure swayed wildly in the slightest breeze but the female remained unperturbed and continued to sit tight.

The intricate nest was only 5ft (1.5m) above the ground but the female refused to be flushed, so that the proceedings could be monitored more easily. The two white eggs soon produced two chicks. These were fed on very small soft-bodied insects, mostly spiders, and nectar. The female, a single parent, endlessly brought food, regardless of our presence and the young fledged without trouble.

The *Lantana*, although over the back wall, was still on our property. The ground fell away steeply there so the wall was built on the top of the bank, rather than on the property line at the foot. This sheltered bank was covered with rocks as an anti-erosion measure and was consequently home to skinks, geckoes, snakes and small birds.

A neat globular nest appeared one day, only 1ft 6in (46cm) up in the *Lantana* tangle, below the Pepper Trees. The outside was made of fresh leaves and it blended in well with the weeds and creepers. A small entrance was situated near the top, unfortunately facing downhill, which meant it could not be observed easily. So well camouflaged was it that it was a wonder that it could be seen at all. The builder proved to be a Tawny-flanked Prinia *Prinia subflava*. This long-tailed, greenish yellow, warbler-like bird has a wide distribution stretching from Africa to south-east Asia. It is very secretive and its rapid, loud 'buzz' was often heard while it remained unseen. Because of this and the inaccessibility of the nest, nothing further was noted other than the fact that the chicks, in spite of living immediately below a tree snake route, were safe in the enclosed nest and all got away.

The non-nesting species could be divided into local and seasonal residents and rare visitors. Every winter, a holiday-making pair of Fork-tailed Drongos *Dicrurus adsimilis* showed up. These handsome, streamlined, jet black birds entertained us with their flying displays. They would soar to a great height, then come rushing downwards in a steep dive, only to pull out just before hitting the ground. These air show aerobatics were not just confined to the breeding season as sometimes thought - the birds performed them out of *joie-de-vivre*. The 'F16s' of the bird world, they were such confident fliers that they chased crows for fun, striking these considerably larger birds on their heads and backs, until the marauders took the hint and left the area.

The attraction was our beehive which the drongos perched above and picked-off 12-15 incoming bees per meal. It is likely that the drongos knew that homing bees carried honey. That these were 'African killer bees' did not bother them and the number they took made no discernible dent in the 6,000-7,000 strong hive. The bees were wonderful honey producers, which continued to work during rain showers, moderate winds and even on glorious moonlit African nights. However, they had disconcerting habits - noises annoyed them, as did just about everything else. Anything black drove these belligerent little insects into a fury. Our black Doberman cross bitch soon learned to avoid the area around the hive altogether after she had been pursued into the house, yelping and covered with angry bees, while our fawn Bullmastiff was ignored.

Not only were the drongos the sole exception to their colour prejudice but they managed to instil a fear into the occupants of the hive which nothing else could. When they were hunting, the hive was quiescent. The bees inside would not fly out, while those which were out tried to sneak back as unobtrusively as possible, with many electing to sit quietly on nearby vegetation, waiting for the danger to pass. How the bees knew about the drongos was a mystery and if anyone needs a subject for a doctoral thesis, here it is.

Every winter, bee-eaters turned-up in the local park. Each would sit on an exposed branch overlooking open ground where it could see, pursue and capture its prey, then glide effortlessly back to knock the insect senseless on the same perch from which the bird had taken off. It was amazing the distance at which hapless flying insects were spotted and the pursuit never failed. Occasionally, a Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus* - a winged 'work of art', and even more streamlined than the drongo - would show up on our back wall. After a quick snack it would leave, for in spite of the bees, the area was not open enough for it.

A lone male Natal Robin (or Red-capped Robin-Chat) *Cossypha natalensis* arrived every winter, and was almost certainly always the same bird. As is often the case, its subdued but matching attire of slaty blue and

burnt orange was more attractive than a gaudy jumble of clashing colours. Its seasonal arrival was odd, for resident Natal Robins lived in a patch of woods just over a mile (1½ km) away, so it probably came from inland. *C. natalensis* always delivers its excellent song from thick cover. It is a contender for the title of our favourite African species, as we like robins/thrushes because of their singing ability and general manner, and it was the only one of the robins ever to visit us.

The last of the winter birds was a once-only (Red-shouldered) Glossy Starling *Lamprotornis nitens*. This is one of the very few birds which we saw in our garden that was already familiar to us before we arrived in Africa. Not from the immediate area, this species became increasingly common 50 miles (80 km) inland in the dry uplands. A typical starling in habits, with eyes the colour of old piano keys, this one spent two days poking around a cavity in a big flame of the forest tree. Finding the hole already occupied by a bush baby, it soon moved on. A Klaas's Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx klaas* with a heavily barred white front and with a green back with orange spots, stopped by in the summer, but never called, foraged, or showed up with a mate.

A pair of Yellow-billed or Black Kites *Milvus migrans* patrolled the valley each summer. Several times a week one of them sailed serenely over the property on motionless wings, steering delicately with its long forked tail. It never landed and did not even slow down to examine the carrion left to tempt it, so what it ate remained a mystery to us. Small birds were never troubled by its presence.

A conspicuous Brown-hooded Kingfisher *Halcyon albiventris* often came to hunt, sitting every time on the same exposed branch of a pine, from where it sallied forth to catch skinks and geckoes. This dingy-looking, 10 in (25.5 cm) long species, like all kingfishers, seemed much bigger because of its huge head and bill. It is often found far from water and lives on reptiles, locusts and other such prey.

On a nearby house lot, a bulldozer cut away part of a bank to level the site and left a sandy, vertical face and, within two days, two pairs of 5 in (13 cm) long Malachite Kingfishers *Alcedo cristata* began to tunnel into it. Although there was a small stream in the park with hundreds of released guppies, the two pairs did nearly all of their hunting in adjacent gardens. This species is normally very retiring and keeps to dark, thick cover, Peering into our dense Natal Silverleaf bush, the only indication of the bird's presence was the flash of its coral-red bill - about two-fifths the length of the body - as it disappeared.

Yet another consumer of lizards (it was tough being a lizard on our property) was the handsome, white-breasted, black-backed Fiscal Shrike *Lanius collaris*, so-called because magistrates wore white shirts and black

cloaks. The male shrike would sit on the gable of the house and whistle its loud, pleasant song for 20 minutes at a time. Never shy, it came down while we sat in the garden and, using its heavy, wickedly-hooked bill, snatched-up skinks and grasshoppers. Oddly, in spite of the fact that it was with us most of the time, we never saw a mate. Perhaps it nested in a nearby garden.

Even shyer and more unobtrusive than the Black-collared Barbet was the Red-fronted Tinker Barbet (or Tinkerbird) *Pogoniulus pusillus*. Commonly heard but rarely seen, and then only as a flash of yellow among the high branches, the persistent 'tonk, tonk' of this bird was one of the sounds of the summer. This wary black and yellow bird (with a red forehead) merged with the sun-dappled foliage and could easily have nested in or around the property without being spotted.

Once, at the far end of the garden, a little bleat was heard coming from a dense bush. It sounded all the world like a goat kid, but investigation proved the maker of the sound to be a bird. It was some time before we knew that the Bleating Warbler *Camaroptera brachyura* was there at all. This drab little bird, cocked its short tail like a wren and was so shy we never saw it outside of its beloved bushes.

The largest species to actually land in the garden was the Hadedda Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash*. Its long, curved, red-lined bill was just right for probing, backwards between its legs, down the sloping cricket burrows. They were about half the length of the ibis's bill and the heavy, slow-moving crickets were easily extracted. All facing the same direction like sheep, the ibis would move forward in a tight group, scouring the ground for the crickets. The Hadedda has adapted well to the intrusion of people and forages on open ground, such as sports fields, in the suburbs. They remain extremely wary though, and if watched for too long, even from a distance, will take off, uttering their harsh cries as they do so. These woodland ibis roosted in the nearby park where they were always being disturbed in the middle of the night, probably by a mongoose. The Hadedda (with the accent on the 'ha') is one of the few birds to clearly utter its name and we would be awakened by their raucous cries 'ha ha, ha dee da', followed by a few sleepy 'ha ha's', as the birds settled again.

All our small birds were thrown into a panic by crows, unless that is the drongos were present. We were occasionally visited by the Pied Crow *Corvus albus*. Black, with a white collar and breast, it seemed to be an accident prone species, for about 15 could be seen at any one time at the local Center for the Rescue of Wildlife (CROW). Maybe because they are so big (20in (50cm) long), they are found more easily. One such bird, with an irreparably broken wing, was given to us by a well-meaning worker at the center. We took it reluctantly and set it on a hurriedly constructed feeding platform in

a lucky bean tree. The bird remained both wary and belligerent, ungratefully stabbing the hand that fed it, and its incessant 'cawing' had a depressing effect on the surrounding birdlife. After a week, this constant uproar attracted two other Pied Crows which 'cawed' encouragingly enough for the invalid to leap from the tree and hedge-hop away. By the time it was traced the following day, the kindly lady in whose garden it had stopped had already rushed off with it to CROW. Nobody at the center recognised the former inmate and, needless to say, we never said a word.

One Sunday morning we were awakened by a haunting call of seven or eight loud, slow, deliberate notes, delivered on a descending scale and repeated over and over again. Looking out of the window, we beheld a magical sight. The whole valley was blanketed by a white mist. Only the garden was free of mist and the house had become a lonely ship on a becalmed sea. The sole sound that eerily quiet morning was made by a 'rain bird', aptly named because it becomes vocal after rain. The latter was so infrequent that we had never heard the bird before, although it had been spotted once in the park. The mist had given it the courage to leave its familiar dense cover and travel round the gardens. Burchell's Coucal *Centropus superciliosus*, to give it its more prosaic name, suddenly appeared from over the wall and began to toy with a piece of paper. This gave us a rare chance to observe this evasive bird, which measures 17½in (44cm) and has a white throat, rufous back, barred rump, long tail and, above all, a heavy, curved bill and fiery red eyes, contriving to make it look like a cross between a hawk and a pheasant. When it tired of playing with the paper, it slipped silently into the mist and was neither heard nor seen again.

Our last local bird, but one which passed so high overhead that it barely qualified, was the White Pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*. A small colony lived on a large pond about two miles (3km) away. Nearly every day, a flock of six to eight flew by on their way to fish in an estuary about 25 miles (40km) up the coast. In spite of looking top-heavy with a bill half the length of their body, these pelicans were wonderfully elegant in the air.

Pet birds

Birds in this category were surprisingly common, with the easy living in the area contributing to their survival. The calling of a neighbour's Cockatiels attracted a multitude of others of every imaginable mutation. Where were they coming from? About three miles (5km) away there was a vegetable oil factory. There they pressed peanuts for the oil and left a huge pile of crushed nuts lying outside. This attracted hordes of pigeons and anything between 20 and 40 Cockatiels each day, along with other birds, including a few parrots. In spite of such large numbers, there were never any reports of Cockatiels nesting in the wild. Probably their commercial

value meant that they did not remain free for long enough. Once we found a young boy hanging precariously some 12-13ft (3.7-4m) up in a Norfolk Island Pine, with a white Cockatiel keeping one branch ahead of him.

Two African Grey Parrots *Psittacus erithacus* showed up at different times, each spending two days in the garden. Both were very wary and sat on top of a baited cage but refused to enter it - one of them shouted abuse at us in Afrikaans. They were remarkably fit and took off flying high, fast and direct. We had more luck catching Budgerigars. These trusting birds invariably entered cages, or sat on our hand. They were not strong fliers and never travelled very far. Usually they were claimed by distraught little girls. Much stronger on the wing were the Peach-faced Lovebirds *Agapornis roseicollis*. Nearly all of them were fairly tame yet nobody ever claimed them, probably because they flew fast and far. The result was that we often had a colony of up to six living in the big *Erythrina* tree, with some leaving only to be replaced by newcomers. This species, called the Rosy-faced Lovebird in South Africa, is found wild in Namibia, on the other side of the continent.

Our own pet bird was a broody Silky hen. Just two weeks after we got it, the bird was found to be crawling with mites. These were quickly removed by submerging the bird in a basin of very hot water, with only the tip of its bill being held clear. Much relaxed after this, it was given two newly hatched chicks to care for and strutted around proudly, fussing over its instant family and bending seeding grasses down for them - the first we knew that hens did this. Unfortunately, only two weeks earlier we had rescued the tall, skinny and still starving young Doberman from the pound. She quickly gave in to temptation and we came home one day to find her eating the Silky, while the hen's hysterical chicks ran up and down outside the driveway gate.

* * *

RATITE SYMPOSIUM

The Association of British Wild Animal Keepers (ABWAK) in conjunction with the Ratite TAG are to hold a Ratite Symposium at Chester Zoo on 26th April 1997.

The papers will cover various aspects of husbandry and other issues concerning Ratites in captivity. There is a special concessionary rate for representatives from Federation/TAG collections.

For more information please send SAE to:-
Michael Woolham, Cotswold Wildlife Park, Burford, Oxon OX18 4JH.



Gibson, Les. 1996. "Birds In A Durban Garden." *The Avicultural magazine* 102(3), 124–136.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/253145>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/314792>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In Copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder

Rights Holder: Avicultural Society

License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions/>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.