



Natural History Snippets

Sri Lanka Natural History Society

Pages from the Murali Diaries – Part 2

Observations of an ardent birder

Introducing our guest contributor

Dr. Murali Vallipuranathan is a Consultant Community Physician and member of the Field Ornithology Group, Sri Lanka. Dr. Murali, as he is generally known, continues to share his observations and photographs of birds, and other wildlife at times. His images are the inspiration for the lucid comments accompanying each image. This time, his explorations have extended far from our shores.

I hope you enjoy his pictures and descriptions as much as I did. Part 1 of the Murali Diaries was released in February.



The Oriental darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*)

A water bird
of tropical South Asia and Southeast Asia.

 Bird or Serpent? Spotting the "Snakebird" of Kumana 

If you ever see a literal "snake" rising out of the wetlands of Sri Lanka, don't panic—you might just be looking at one of the most fascinating avian hunters in the wild!

Commonly known as the Oriental Darter, this incredible creature is famous for its impossibly long, slender neck. When it swims with its body submerged, it looks exactly like a cobra ready to strike.

What makes this bird so unique?

Unlike ducks, darters don't have waterproof feathers. While that sounds like a terrible design flaw for a water bird, it's actually their superpower! Because their feathers absorb water, they lose buoyancy, allowing them to dive deeply and stealthily track fish underwater.

As captured perfectly, after a deep dive, they have to spend hours perched on logs with their wings spread out wide to dry in the sun.

 Observation Details:

Species: Oriental Darter

Location: Kumana National Park, Sri Lanka

Date of Observation: December 28, 2025

Murali Vallipuranathan

5.6.2026



Captured at the Edge:
The Monogamous Strut of Arali Thurai
 Francolins are small game birds of the Pheasant family.

While the Grey Francolin (*Ortygornis pondicerianus*) is a common sight across the vast, dry plains of India, in Sri Lanka, it is a highly localized treasure. This striking pair was photographed foraging along the arid, sandy coastal edges of Arali Thurai, Jaffna.

The Dynamics of the Pair

Captured right at the onset of their peak breeding season, Grey Francolins are strictly monogamous and almost exclusively move in pairs during this time.

On the Left (The Sentinel): Standing tall with a robust, upright neck, the male scans the open

terrain. During this season, males are fiercely territorial, relying on sharp tarsal spurs on their legs to defend their patch of scrub.

On the Right: Showing a lower, more compact profile, the female moves close to the ground, ready to vanish into the nearby thorny undergrowth at a moment's notice.

Survival on foot

True to their reputation as ultimate ground-dwellers, these birds are notoriously reluctant fliers. When startled, they prefer a remarkably swift, gliding run to slip effortlessly into the nearest cactus patch or cover.

An incredible documentation of a species thriving in its specialized northern habitat!

Location: Arali Thurai, Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Date of Observation: April 30, 2026

Murali Vallipuranathan

✿ Pink Horizons in Saravanai! ✿

Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) ♀

The northern skies have whispered a secret, and the waters of Jaffna are glowing with a familiar rosy hue. They are back!

Today, April 30, 2026, a breathtaking colony of migrant Greater Flamingos were spotted gracing the wetlands of Saravanai in the Jaffna District. Seeing these elegant travellers standing tall against the serene landscape is a powerful reminder of nature's incredible rhythms and the importance of preserving our precious Sri Lankan wetlands.



Quick highlights

Location: Saravanai,
 Jaffna District, Sri
 Lanka

Observation Date:
 April 30, 2026

Status: Annual winter/spring migrants finding sanctuary in our shallow lagoons.

There is something truly magical about watching these "fire-birds" wade through the water. If you're in the area, grab your binoculars, head out to the Saravanai region, and witness this pink spectacle for yourself!

Birding Tip: Remember to maintain a respectful distance to ensure these beautiful migrants feel safe and undisturbed during their stay.

Murali Vallipuranathan



🎵 Meet my backyard singer! 🎵

The Magpie-Robin (*Copsychus saularis*)

The Oriental magpie-robin is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the thrush family Turdidae but now considered an Old-World flycatcher. [Internet]

This gorgeous Oriental Magpie-Robin has made my garden in Dehiwala his personal concert stage. He drops by daily, without fail, to serenade us during the quiet mornings and peaceful evenings.

I managed to snap this photo and capture a brief snippet of his beautiful melody on 10.05.2026.

Murali Vallipuranathan

A Ritual of a Different Kind: The Javan Munia's Morning Bath 🛀🌸

The Javan Munia (*Lonchura leucogastroides*)



While many visit the sacred Taman Beji Griya for the Melukat purification ritual, I managed to capture a local resident performing its own version of a holy dip! This Javan Munia took full advantage of the cool, cascading waters for a vigorous morning bath. Watching it go from cautious observation (Left) to a full-on splash (Right) was a highlight of the trip.

The Birder's Eye: A Tale of Two Cousins

For those familiar with the birds of the Indian subcontinent, this little finch might look like a "double" for the White-rumped Munia found in Sri Lanka. However, there are key differences that set this Indonesian endemic apart:

The "Brown" Factor: The Javan Munia is noticeably more brownish across the back and wings compared to the darker, almost blackish tones of its Sri Lankan relative.

The Missing "Strobe": Unlike its cousin, it lacks the brilliant white rump that flashes when in flight, keeping a more uniform chocolate-brown profile.

Taxonomic Distinction: Despite the striking resemblance, they are recognized as distinct species, a testament to how geography shapes evolution across our beautiful islands. It's a reminder that even in the most famous cultural sites, nature is busy performing its own timeless rituals.

Location: Taman Beji Griya Waterfalls, Bali

Murali Vallipuranathan, 17.4.2026



Pale-billed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos ceylonense*)

I spotted the smallest bird in Sri Lanka—the Pale-billed Flowerpecker—having an absolute feast in Dehiwala today!

Don't let the size fool you; this 8cm speedster is a local legend. While they usually go for berries, this one decided to skip the snacks and go straight for the king of fruits. Talk about "mango whacking"!

Fun Fact: They are so small they weigh about the same as two sheets of paper!



Location: Dehiwala, Sri Lanka

May 10, 2026

Murali Vallipuranathan

The pale-billed flowerpecker or Tickell's flowerpecker is a tiny bird that feeds on nectar and berries, found in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and western Myanmar. The bird is common especially in urban gardens with berry bearing trees.

- Wikipedia

Text and photography by Murali Vallipuranathan

Additional material and Design
Malik Fernando