

Mandapam And Its Environs

SOUVENIR

Edited

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Birds and Bird Catchers Of Ramanathapuram Coast

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The Ramanathapuram coast with its long stretch of coast line has many mud flats, lagoons and estuaries. These ecological niches attract a great variety of coastal birds, some of them come from distant places like Siberia and Chinese coast. Recognising no national boundaries these birds visit our coast for food as their place of birth becomes too cold from them live. The common among them are the terns and plovers.*

The primitive man lived on animal flesh. Notwithstanding the civilisation making great strides in the standard of living and the quality of life, some people yet live on the wild animals for their existence. The 'Narikuravas', the bird catchers belong to the nomadic tribe, ill-clad, ill-fed and illiterate. They have no house to live and move from place to place, often following the birds on which they subsist.

The common implement they use are the clap traps, catapult, nooses and the pole nets. The efficiency of their nets have increased with the use of nylon nets. The clap traps can be used for catching about 20 to 40 birds at a time. It is made of nylon net of width about 1 meter supported by bamboo poles of length 1 meter. The total length of the net may be 10 to 15 meters. The foot rope and the head ropes are attached to an iron wire. Coy birds both live and stuffed are kept within the net. The birds are usually blinded by tying their eye lids with the rachis of their feathers and stunning them by delivering a hard blow on the head. The birds thus made inactive stand still attracting the overflying birds. When sufficient number of birds land within the net, it is closed by releasing the wire by the bird-catcher sitting at the far end of the wire. The birds thus trapped are collected in a narrow mouthed basket.

The birds commonly caught are terns and plovers, each weighing about 80-150 g. The birds being a delicacy with the local people, it is sold at a rate of Rs. 3. per pair. The occurrence of the birds is highly seasonal and varies from species to species. However the common terns and plovers occur along the coast during the months of July to September when the low lying areas and the mud flats get exposed. During this time the fishes and other aquatic animals caught in the shallow pools become an easy prey to the birds. Often these birds migrate in large numbers. Most of them come for feeding from their distant homes as the climate in these places become unfavourable for them. Being warm blooded animals they cannot withstand the very cold climate touching below zero degree centigrade in places like Siberia during the winter. Food also become scarce in these places for these birds during these times. Hence they migrate to the places with warm climate having enough food for them.

It is estimated that as much as 50 species of migratory birds visit Ramanathapuram and Point Calimer from places like Siberia, Caspian Sea, European and Chinese coasts. Migration of these birds are confirmed by the recovery of the tags. These tags are aluminium rings with inscriptions and are attached to the legs of the birds. Recently two such tags were recovered from the sandwich tern

* The list of birds is given by Dr. R. Sugathan, Project Officer Avian Research Project (BNHS) Point Calimer, Tamilnadu.

(*Sterna sandvicensis*) from Dhanuskodi. These terns weighing about 100 g were tagged from Russians coast.

Recognising the damage inflicted on these migrating birds by the bird catchers to whom these birds fall an easy prey, the catching coastal birds is banned by the Govt. of India. But inspite of the ban, the birds are caught as this profession has become a traditional livelihood for the Narikuravas who live far below the poverty line. Unless an alternative avocation is offered to them it will not be possible to save the migratory birds from being caught. It has been estimated that about 30% of the birds only return to their nesting grounds after completing their winter migration.

It is amazing to note that how these birds migrate to the distant places covering more than 5000 K. M. and return to the same place for nesting. Though the scientists are trying to explain this phenomena, the intercontinental migration of birds is still shrouded with mystery.

SHORE BIRDS OF RAMANATHAPURAM COAST

SI No	Common Name / Scientific Name / Local Name	Size	Field characters	Habitat	Status
1	Little coromorant (<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>)	51 cm (20")	A black-duck like bird floating or diving. Silvery grey with long stiff tail and slender compressed sharply; hooked bill with white patch on the throat	Both fresh as well as salt water areas, sand banks and rocks etc.	R
2	Grey Heron (<i>Ardea cinerea</i>)	90 cm (36")	A large heron with long bill, neck and legs; Grey above, head and neck white, under parts greyish white	Shallow water both salt and fresh, including shore and marshes river beds etc.	M/R
3	Pond heron (<i>Ardeola grayii</i>)	46 cm (18")	An egret-like bird which is totally camouflaged earthy brown when at rest	Seashore, back waters, Paddy fields, swamps and marshes	R
4	Large Egret (<i>Egretta alba</i>)	88 cm (35")	Large white heron with long neck, long black legs, yellow above the "Knee", black bill with yellow base	Shallow lagoons edges of lakes river banks, estuaries, swamp etc.	R/M
5	Small Egret (<i>E. intermedia</i>)	45 cm (26")	Slightly Smaller than large Egret. Bill black yellow at the base. Legs and feet dusty black, greenish on the joints and tibia.	Habitat is same as that of large egret	R/M
6	Little Egret (<i>E. garzetta</i>)	63 cm (25")	Medium-sized slim heron, with thin bill and slender neck. Pure white, with long plumes on head, back, and chest in breeding season. Bill and legs black; feet yellow.	Shallow lakes and pools, banks of slow flowing river, fresh and salt marshes, flooded land, estuaries etc.	R
7	Reaf Heron (<i>gularis</i>)	63 cm (25")	This bird is seen in two colour phases in adult. (1) Pure white (2) slaty grey to slaty blue with a white neck and upper foreneck. White phase indistinguishable from little Egret except by more solitary habit and sea coast habit	Isolated or two's and threes along the shore line, marshes, salt swamps etc.	R/M

8	Painted Stork (<i>Ibis leucocephalus</i>)	93 cm (40")	Long legged heavy bird with a heavy yellow bill slightly down curved at tip with a skinney yellow face. The white coat is barred with metallic green and black above wing and tail black with a rose pink near the tail	Around shallow water near sea shore salt marsh paddy field drying ponds. etc	R
9	Spoon bill (<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>)	60 cm (24")	A pure white bird with long neck legs with a long - flat black and yellow spoon-shaped bill. Cinnamon - yellow patch at the base of fore neck, naked yellow throat.	Rivers, tidal creek, swampss. Marshes etc.	R/M
10	Flamingo (<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>)	140 cm (54")	A rosey white bird with long snake, like neck with massive pink sharply down curved bill long legs.	Salt water lake lagoons, salt pans estuaries, tidal mud flats on the sea shore	R/M
11	Pintail (<i>Anas soute</i>)	65 cm (26") 55 cm* (22)	Slender, long necked clabbling duck. Male has long central tail feathers. Chocolate - brown head, throat, and hind neck. White under parts and stripe inside of the neck during breeding. Female Slim, thin peck, pointed tail, grey bill	Coasts, estuaries salt marshes etc.	M
12	Garganey (<i>Anas querquedula</i>)	38 cm (15")	Smaller slender duck Mottled brown, with streak from eye to nape; greyish sides and white belly contrast with brown breast. Female similar to male but with pale spot at base of bill more pronounced eyebrow, and paler wings in flight.	Vegetated lakes, ponds marhes and swampy wetlands.	M
13	Pariah kite (<i>Milvus migrans</i>)	61 cm (24")	Common dark fulvous - brown hawk with a deeply forked tail, Black bill, yellow cere and gape, lower mandible yellow or greenish yellow legs and feet pale yellow	Neighbour hood of human habitation fishing industry and refuse dumps.	R
14	Brahminy kite (<i>Haliastur Indus</i>)	48 cm (19")	Chestnut bird with white head, neck, upper back and breast, brown abdomen. Wings are with black tips. Horny bluish bill with paler tip. Legs and feet dull yellow. Greyish or greenish yellow.	Seen frequer along sea shore, paddy fields and near habitation.	R

15	White-bellied sea Eagle (<i>Haliaeetus leucogaster</i>)	66-71cm (26"-28")	Large ashy brown eagle with white head, neck and under parts. Female is larger than male. Bill dark leaden, legs and feet pale yellowish white to greyish with darker claws.	Sea coast, tidal creeks and estuaries,	R
16	Grey Plover (<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>)	28cm (11")	One of the biggest plovers with Grey-white speckle on mantle and wings. Grey under wing marked at all seasons by black axillaries.	Open shore lines, estuaries, and mud flats. Seldom found on land.	M
17	Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>)	25 cm (10")	Dark above, speckled with golden-yellow. More black but less white on face and under parts. wing extends well beyond tail at rest. Grey buff under wing and axillaries.	Ploughed fields and mostly drier areas along the coastal belt.	M
18	Little ringed plover (<i>Charadrius dubius</i>)	15 cm (6")	Smaller than Ringed plover with some what similar breast band. In flight lacks white wing bar. Bill dark; legs pale yellow, prominent yellow eye-ring	Marshes, lagoons and coasts.	M
19	Kentish plover (<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>)	16 cm (6")	A typical plover; breast band lacking, but has a small black patch at either side of the breast. White wing bar and white outer tail feathers show in flight.	Sandy and muddy shorelines, estuaries, lagoons and salt pans. Normally not far from the sea; breeds on beaches and dried out lagoons.	R
20	Lesser sand Plover (<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>)	19 cm (7")	A greyish brown bird with white face, under parts and wing bar; a dark brown mark on lore, below eye, and on ear coverts. Beak black, legs dark grey or greenish grey.	It frequents, with about equal favour, the seashore, mud-flats salt marshes and open pastures. Flocks number in up to hundreds feed in scattered formation but mass into compact flights when disturbed.	M
21	Whimbrel (<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>)	43 cm	It is smaller than curlew, shorter beak. Distinguished easily from all other shore birds by their long slender, down curved beaks combined with large size.	They are often seen estuaries, lagoons, and salt flats all around the coast, but is not common in the wet zone. It prefers salt or brackish waters to fresh, and does not normally range inland to any distance.	M
22	Curlew (<i>Numenius arausus</i>)	53 cm (21")	One of the largest shore birds. It is distinguished from whimbrel by large size comparatively short bill and a dark crown divided by median broken pale line	It frequents the muddy or stony shores, lagoons, creeks, tidal flats and low pastures etc.	M

23	Blacktailed Godwit (<i>Limosa limosa</i>)		A large wader dark sandish brown above whitish below with a long straight or slightly up curved bill. From the Bartailed Godwit this can be distinguished by, much longer legs, very well - marked white wing bar, single, broad black band across the tip of the white tail.	They are more of fresh water bird than the Bartailed Godwit, seen in inland water, shallow coastal lagoons, mud flats, and estuaries.	M
24	Bartailed Godwit (<i>Limosa lapponica</i>)		Bill pink on the base, shading to black at the tip. legs and feet - greenish - grey. Distinctively up curved bill, wing bar absent, particoloured black and white tail. Legs shorter than black tailed godwit.	They are seen in lagoons and mud - flats, tidal waters, shallow creeks etc in solitary or in twos and threes.	M
25	Common snipe (<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>)		A brown obliteratively patterned marsh hunting bird with short slender bill. Difficult to observe when squatting motionless on the ground. Above, dark brown, heavily streaked with black, rufous and buff, below whitish.	Swampy edges harvested paddyfield	M
26	Common Redshank (<i>Tringa totanus</i>)	28 cm (11")	A Greyish - brown wader with bright orange red legs. Bill slightly longer than head, red at base. Upper parts brown in all seasons, under parts white, with breast and flanks boldly striated. In flight; legs extend beyond barred tail. White rump extends up back in bold V. Broad white trailing edge to wing.	Marshes, wet meadows, estuaries, rocky shores, salt pans	M
27	Green Shank (<i>Tringa acularis</i>)	30 cm (12")	Slim grey wader with long, pale green legs and long bill slightly upturned and atleast twice as long as head. Upper parts grey, flecked with black and white breast peckled and streaked, rest of underparts white. Legs extend beyond tail in flight. No wing bar. White rump extends up back in V. Tail slightly barred; looks pale in flight.	Open areas, fresh water margins, estuaries, salt water, marsh etc.	M
28	Common Sandpiper (<i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>)	19 cm (7 1/2")	Slim, medium-sized brown and white wader that typically wags its tail. Patch	Lakeshores, fast streams etc mostly along fresh water margins.	M

- of brown on sides of breast separated from upperparts by wedge of white, underparts; white Bill, short, yellowish-green legs. Prominent wing bar, dark rump, and white barred outer tail feathers.
- 29 Turnstone
(*Arremonia interpres*) 23 cm (9") Unique wader that finds foods by turning over seaweeds and stones. Short, stout, slightly up curved bill, and short, orange legs, summer plumage, bold rustbrown, black and white is highly effective camouflage; in winter, becomes generally duller. Open dry areas near sea and rocky shores; M
- 30 Knot
(*Calidris canuta*) 25 cm (10") Medium-sized wader, with stocky build and short neck, legs, and bill. In summer, deep chestnut-red below. In winter grey above and whitish below white wing-bar and tail. Found on estuaries and along open shores M
- 31 Eastern knot
(*Calidris tenuirostris*) 29 cm (11 1/2") Light brownish grey, bird, boldly streaked with black. Lower back, rump and upper tail-coverts dark brown scalloped with white, much broadly on the last. Under parts white, foreneck and upper breast streaked or spotted with dark brown. Seen along tidal mudflats and creeks on the sea coast. Also in the mud flat along with curlew, sand piper and little stints. M
- 32 Sanderling
(*Calidris alba*) 20 cm (8") A short-billed, active little wader that follows breaking waves in and out. Rusty-brown on back; lacks eye-stripe; under parts white, with dark, rusty streaks on breast almost forming complete pectoral band. In flight, shows very bold white wing bars. They frequent open sandy or some times rocky shore. M
- 33 Little stint
(*Calidris minuta*) 13 cm (5") A tiny, very active version of Dunlin. Short straight bill and short black legs. During breeding upperparts boldly edged with rufous and buff; rufous streaking on breast and white belly. Underparts white with faint streaking on sides of breast. In flight, shows wing bar and grey outer tail feathers. Open marsh, small pools, seashore and on coastal marshes etc. M

34	Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpinus</i>)	18 cm (7")	The standard small wader. Summer upperparts russet-brown; underparts white with streaked breast and prominent patch of black on belly. In winter, grey-brown above, grey white below. Bill rather longer and slightly down curved at tip. In flight, shows faint wing bar, black centred rump and tail with grey sides.	Estuaries, shore line, beaches, pools etc.	M
35	Curlew sandpiper (<i>Calidris testaceus</i>)	19 cm (7½")	Medium-sized wader similar to Dunlin but slightly larger and with prominent white rump. In summer has deep chestnut under parts. Adults are dull grey above. Longer neck, longer legs, more up right posture, longer decurved bill, and more elegant shape than dunlin.	Mudflats, marshes and near shoreline	M
36	Broadbilled Sandpiper (<i>Limicola falcinellus</i>)	16 cm (6½")	Short-legged wader slightly smaller than Dunlin, with striped and bodypattern recalling that of stripe. Dark brown upper parts marked with double creamy white 'V'; head has pale eyebrow that may be divided over eye, and distinct dark stripe through eye. Bill drooped or kinked at tip. Breast streaked, belly white. In greyer winter plumage, head pattern, bill shape and short legs best distinguish it from Dunlin.	Estuaries, marshes, salt pans etc.	M
37	Ruff and Reeve (<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>)		During breeding season sexes can be easily separated. Males (ruff) have wattled face, colourful ear-tufts. In non breeding they look like female (reeve); with a prominent scaly back pattern, due to the pale margins of dark feathers. The bill looks rather short, for a wader, and the legs vary in colour from greenish yellow to red, causing confusion with red shank. The white crescents on each side of the dark tail and a narrow white wing bar show in flight.	They prefer grassy marsh land mud flats and paddy fields.	M

38	Brown headed gull (<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i>)		In winter the head is white with a black spot in front of the eye, dark grey spot on the ear coverts, and usually two pale grey bands crossing the crown, one from the hind part of the eye, and the other a little farther back. The outer two primaries each having a big white spot near the tip.	Confined to the seaboard and adjacent lagoons and estuaries.	
39	Blackheaded gull (<i>Larus ridibundus</i>)	35-35cm (14"-15")	The standard hooded, small gull. In summer chocolate hood and red bill and legs combination of white forewing and dark underside of primaries is diagnostic. First year birds have more extensive black tips to primaries, black tail band, and bold white fore wing; bill flesh coloured, with dark tips.	Coasts, inland waters, rubbish dumps, sewage, reservoirs etc.	M
40	Gull-billed Tern (<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>)	38 cm (15")	Large gull like tern with pale grey upper parts and rump, white under parts, and black cap heavy, stubby, black bill distinctive at all seasons, in winter black cap reduced to smudge behind eye. Legs black.	Marsh, lagoons, salt pans, coast	M
41	Caspian Tern (<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>)	53 cm (21")	Nearly the size of a black headed gull, Gull like flight, but dives in typical tern manner. Under side primaries black. Black cap and huge coralred bill distinctive at all season, though the cap is streaked with white in winter.	Beaches and small islands, sea coast and inland along large rivers.	M
42	Common Tern (<i>Sterna hirundo</i>)	35 cm (14")	A graceful sea tern. Grey above, paler grey below, with white flash below black cap, orange red bill with dark tip, orange red legs. Deeply forked tail doesnot extend beyond folded wings.		R
43	Little Tern (<i>Sterna albifrons</i>)	24 cm (9 1/2")	Smallest of the terns distinguished by its faster wing beats and frequent hovering like king fisher. Legs yellow bill yellow tipped with black during breeding forehead white,	All along the shore swamp marsh etc.	M
44	Whiskered tern (<i>Chlidomias hybrida</i>)	23 cm (9 1/2")	In winter wings uniformly light grey above less extensive black on head and slightly longer bill.	Prefers shallow brackish and fresh waters.	M

45	Large crested tern (<i>Sterna bergii</i>)		In winter the front part of the crown is white, spotted with black. Beak pale greenish-yellow; irides nearby black, legs black with a variable amount of yellow on the soles and hock-joint. The size, beak-colour and darker, more smoky-grey back and wings, distinguish this from the smaller crested tern with which it often associates.	Seabird frequents coastal lagoons and estuaries etc.	M
46	Lesser crested Tern (<i>Sterna bengalense</i>)	43 cm (16½")	Very similar to large crested tern, except in size and the crest. Smaller the crown and the nuchal crest wholly black down to the eye.	Offshore and coast.	R/M
47	Sandwich tern (<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>)		Larger than Gull billed tern. Black, long and slender bill tipped with yellow. A more pronounced nuchal tuft than in Gull billed Tern.	Offshore and coast	M
48	Indian river tern (<i>Sterna surantia</i>)		A slender graceful fluviatile bird, pale grey above, white below, with long narrow pointed wings deeply forked swallow tail, very short red legs, and pointed deep yellow bill.	Stretches of rivers large tanks estuaries	R

M = Migratory; R = Resident