



Semi-arid habitat of the Indian Courser

Habitat:

Semi-arid stony country, edges of deserts, short sparse grasslands, fallow land, non-agricultural plains and village grazing grounds or '*gaay-rans*'. Avoid thick vegetation, high rainfall and deserts.

Indicator species:

A representative bird of dry open habitat, one of our most threatened habitats today. The life of the Courser indicates that the so called 'waste lands' are also full of life, where species like Coursers find sufficient food to live and breed.



Fallow land with goat droppings



Coursers taking a bath in a puddle

Habit:

Diurnal. In pairs or small parties. Large seasonal congregations of 70 birds are recorded by us. Stand in the shade of short trees on hot noon. Cautiously approach waterholes with lapwings, sandgrouses, larks, babblers, etc. to drink water at noon.

Distribution:

In our Subcontinent, India, West Pakistan, Bangla Desh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Usually inhabit low and dry country.

Status:

Resident. Local migration in summer and monsoon.

Food:

Ground dwelling invertebrates like termites (Isoptera), ants (Hymenoptera) beetles (Coleoptera), bugs (Heteroptera), Homopterans, web-spinners (Embioptera), crickets and grasshoppers (Orthoptera). The dry weight of a single dropping of the Courser ranges 230 to 280 mg. Fecal droppings are loaded with undigested food remains, from which food species may be identified.



Picking food by probing the ground



Stenozygum speciosum



Agonoscelis nubilis



Plautia crossota



Coleopteran beetle



Cerambycid beetle



*Camponotus compressus*_



Coreid bug



Dung beetle

Nest:

A shallow scrape on bare ground, amidst debris, pebbles, stones, and cow dung heaps. Nesting material not added. In arid, semi-

arid and fallow land. Both parents incubate, female more than male. Chicks start walking after hatching, instinctively feed by themselves,

but are supplemented for a day or two by parents. Adults supervise their movements by uttering specific calls.

Incubation:



Pair. The sexes appear alike to us - non-dimorphic



Approaching the nest with one egg ; fluffing feathers



Bending to sit on the egg



Incubating

Eggs:



Various colour shades of the eggs of the courser. Surprisingly, they match with the colour of the substrate and are difficult to detect

Loving care of the young:



A camouflaged chick of less than one week age



A rare photograph of the courser feeding the chick



Juvenile plumage

Key Features:

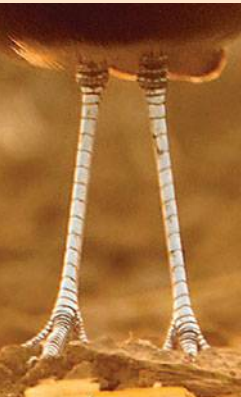


Indian Courser in profile

- Rich, rufous crown.
- Black & white eye stripe to nape.
- Bill black, narrow, curved downwards.
- Iris - hazel.
- Sandy brown plumage above, chestnut below.
- Wings narrow, pointed.
- Dark primaries seen in flight.
- Legs –bare, long, slender, china-white.
- Hind toe absent.
- **Chick:** Patterned with mottled ginger, whitish and dark down; whitish below; grey legs.
- **Young :** Dull buff, barred; pale eyebrow; lacks black eye stripe.



The unique pattern on head from side, back and front



China-white legs



Lacks hind toe-hence cursorial



Wing pattern is seen

Related species:

Cream-coloured Courser

(*Cursorius cursor*): winter visitor to NW India;

Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*): **Endemic** to Eastern Ghats of south Andhra Pradesh (Lankamalai, Velikonda and Palakonda hill-ranges) and south Madhya Pradesh. Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary holds majority of birds. **Critically Endangered.**



Cream-coloured Courser and Jerdon's Courser



[Painting by G. Keulemans. Source: Wikipedia]

Other avifauna in Courser habitat:



Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse



Lark species



Yellow-wattled Lapwing

Economic importance and conservation:

The insectivorous coursers play an important role as controllers of insect pest. Protected under Wild Life (Protection) Act. Today, courier habitats are being converted to crop land with negative effect on their populations. Identifying occupied habitats and protecting them by peoples’ participation is the only hope for this beautiful species. ‘Rural Outreach Programs’, such as those undertaken by **Ela Foundation** for public education stressing conservation of so called ‘wastelands’ is the key to their survival.

Indian Courser *Cursorius coromandelicus* (Gmelin, 1789).

Type locality: Coromandel Coast (India).
Yerra chitawa (Telugu); **Al katti** (Tamil); **Veli alappan** (Malayalam); **Weli kirala** (Sinhala); **Dhawik; Pore-chalawani** (Marathi); **Nukri** (Hindi); **Thonth** (Bihar - Mirshakars); **Shwetcharan** (white legged); **Kshiprachal (swift footed)**(Sanskrit) – **aply descriptive.**

- **Size:** 260 mm.
- **Weight:** 130 to 158 g.
- **Wing:** Male 143 – 163 mm. **Tail** 45 – 64 mm.
- **Tarsus:** 49 – 57 mm.
- **Breeding season:** March – August.
- **Clutch:** 1 – 3 eggs. One clutch per year.
- **Eggs:** Oval; black spotted, blotched; smooth to coarse; cryptic.
- **Egg Size:** 30.6 x 23.4 mm (Munjpara-PhD Thesis).
- **Incubation:** 15- 16 d.
- **Nuptial displays:** Running, mutual feeding and calls.
- **Call:** Piping, shrill calls, usually uttered when disturbed.



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- **Chief Editor:** Dr. Satish Pande.
- **Photographs:** Kiran Ghadge, Dr. Satish Karmalkar, Fayaz Shaikh, Rajkumar Pawar, Ashish Joshi, Mandar Kulkarni, Sandeep Bhavsar and Dr. Satish Pande.
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Indian Courser

- **Order:** Charadriiformes
- **Family:** Glareolidae
- **Status:** Resident.

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Amazing Facts:

The courier’s feet lack hind toe, hence this ground dwelling (cursorial) bird cannot perch on trees! Live in hot climatic zones and resort to panting with open mouth for thermo-regulation. The cryptically coloured eggs and chicks merge with surroundings and are difficult to spot in drab brownish habitats - a survival adaption. The related Jerdon’s Courser, discovered by T. C. Jerdon in 1848, was thought to be extinct, (and

an epitaph was built in Bronx Zoo); it was later rediscovered in 1986. A postal stamp is released in its commemoration.



Cultural aspects:

The Courser prefers to walk and run than fly. Children from villages often chase it for fun, hence the Marathi name *Pore chalawani* – kid teaser.

Etymology:

Cursorius (L.), a runner; *coromandelicus* (L.), epithet after the Coromandel Coast of south west India, from where it was first described. (Pande, Satish (2009).

Camouflage:



Cryptic colouration of eggs



The courier hidden amidst cow-dung droppings



Plumage matches the habitat colour

Behaviour:



Running



Broken-wing display



Panting during hot noon

Threats:



Road widening can destroy the already shrinking habitat of coursers



Indian Fox, a potential threat to eggs and chicks of grassland birds



A herd of goats can trample the eggs of the courier



Ploughing in courier habitat

Habitat loss, collection of firewood, road development and converting semi-arid habitats to cropland by providing irrigation are major threats. Natural causes are predation by fox, mongoose, wolf and rarely, loss of nests due to hail storms.

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