

# An update on the distribution of Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* in southern India

Praveen J.

Praveen J., 2011. An update on the distribution of Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* in southern India.

*Indian BIRDS* 7 (1): 14–16.

Praveen J., B303, Shriram Spurthi, ITPL Main Road, Brookefields, Bangalore 560037, Karnataka, India.

Email: [paintedstork@gmail.com](mailto:paintedstork@gmail.com)

Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* is known to depend on forest-fringed water bodies with good stocks of fish (BirdLife International 2010). It is thought to be undergoing a moderate population reduction owing to forest degradation, over-fishing, and quite possibly by pollution of its habitat, and hence is classified as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2010).

Historically, the species was known to occur in the Himalayan foothills and north-eastern India (Naoroji 2007) until it was discovered from Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka (Lethaby 2004), followed by several sight and photographic records from other parts of southern India. Many of these sightings were reported in email discussion groups of *Bngbirds*, *KeralaBirder*, *TamilBirds*, nature photograph websites like [www.indianaturewatch.net](http://www.indianaturewatch.net), or via personal emails to the author.

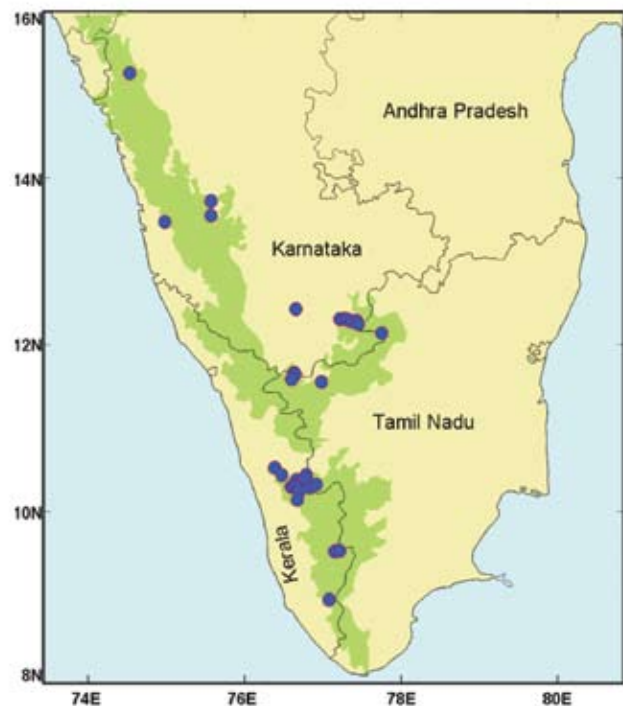
Almost all sightings from Kerala (n=14/15) were reported during organised bird surveys by Kerala Forest Department (Praveen & Nameer 2009), while all reports from Karnataka (n=13), and Tamil Nadu (n=4), were the results of uncoordinated, independent trips. Care was taken to double-check the identification of the species with the observer(s), particularly the diagnostic brown upper-tail coverts, *contra* white in Grey-headed Fish-Eagle *I. ichthyaetus* (Naoroji 2007). In many cases an observer(s) captured at least one photograph showing these field marks. Some of the record sites (n=14) are well frequented by birdwatchers / photographers and there are multiple sightings from here (indicated by †), as well as year-round observations; hence for consistency, only the names of first observer, and the date of first observation are mentioned in the Table. Sites (n=7) where the author has made observations are marked with an asterisk (\*) while sites (n=12) from where the author has verified photographs are marked with a 'plus' (+). All the sightings are mapped to give a perspective of the distribution (Map). For the record, the first sighting from Karnataka was in December 2003, from Kerala in January 2006, and from Tamil Nadu in June 2009.

This note summarises the sightings of this raptor from 32 locations in Karnataka (KA), Tamil Nadu (TN), and Kerala (KE) since 2003 (Table).

As it can be seen from the map, there are two major concentrations for the species. One around the basin of mid-course of the Cauvery River, from about Ranganathittu till Hogenekkal, while the second around the Chalakudy River basin. These two regions account for 65% of the sightings from southern India and hence it is recommended that all efforts should be directed to conserve the species in these areas. It is also of relevance that nearly 80% (n=25) of the sightings are

in protected areas (see Table). Significantly too, nearly half the sites (n=15) in southern India are reservoirs (indicated by †) on rivers, mostly originating in the Western Ghats and flowing west. The marked habitat preference of the species, "... swift-flowing higher forested reaches of the rivers ..." (Naoroji 2007), does not necessarily seem to be the case in southern India. Almost all the west-flowing rivers of Western Ghats have been dammed, and the species has probably adapted to the high concentration of fish in these near-stagnant waters.

It is worth mentioning that all the fish-eagles seen in southern India in the past were believed to be Grey-headed Fish-Eagle until photographs from Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) were scrutinised. Previously well-known sites for *ichthyaetus*, including Periyar Tiger Reserve, Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, Vazhachal reserve forest, and Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary in Kerala were rechecked during bird surveys, with the help of recent field-identification literature, and the fish-eagles have turned out to be *humilis*!



Map. Distribution of Lesser Fish-Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* in southern India. Green=Western Ghats; Blue dots=Bird sightings. (Courtesy: S. Subramanya)

Site	PA / RF	Status	ST	River	First Observer	First Observation	References
Ganeshgudi <sup>+</sup>	Dandeli	WLS	KA	Kali	SS <sup>+</sup>	Dec 2007 <sup>†</sup>	Shivaram (2008)
Lakkavalli	Bhadra	WLS	KA	Bhadra <sup>†</sup>	PJ*	Dec 2008 <sup>†</sup>	Personal observation
Kudre-Hebbe	Bhadra	WLS	KA	Bhadra <sup>†</sup>	VMR	Jan 2010	Mohan Raj (2010)
Hebri	Someshwara	WLS	KA	Seetanadi	GT	July 2010	Timappur (2010)
Ranganathittu <sup>+</sup>	Ranganathittu	BS	KA	Cauvery	SSL <sup>+</sup>	Feb 2008 <sup>†</sup>	Saligram (2008)
Mekadatu	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	PJ*	Aug. 2006	Personal observation
Doddamakalli	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	SS <sup>+</sup>	June 2004 <sup>†</sup>	Lethaby (2004)
Bheemeshwari <sup>+</sup>	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	SS**	May 2004 <sup>†</sup>	Lethaby (2004)
Muthathi <sup>+</sup>	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	DK <sup>+</sup>	June 2010 <sup>†</sup>	D. Karuthedathu ( <i>pers. comm.</i> June 2010)
Galibore <sup>+</sup>	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	VC**	Dec 2003 <sup>†</sup>	Lethaby (2004)
Sangam <sup>+</sup>	Cauvery	WLS	KA	Cauvery	PJ*	Aug. 2006	Personal observation
Hogenekkal	Hosur	RF	TN	Cauvery	PJ*	June 2009 <sup>†</sup>	Personal observation
Huli Katte	Bandipur	NP	KA	None	SVT <sup>+</sup>	July 2010	S. V. Thimappa ( <i>pers. comm.</i> July 2010)
Yere Katte	Bandipur	NP	KA	None	SVT	May 2010	Thimappa (2010)
Mudumalai <sup>+</sup>	Mudumalai	WLS	TN	Moyar	JB <sup>+</sup>	Mar. 2010	Balamurugan (2010)
Mangalapatti <sup>+</sup>	Satyamangalam	RF	TN	Moyar	CG <sup>+</sup>	Apr. 2010	Christopher G. ( <i>pers. comm.</i> June 2010)
Moodal	Peechi-Vazhani	WLS	KE	Manali <sup>†</sup>	DK	Nov. 2006	Nameer & Nirmal 2007a
Mulappara <sup>+</sup>	Chimmony	WLS	KE	Chim- mony <sup>†</sup>	PON	Nov. 2006	Nameer & Nirmal 2007b
Thunakadavu	Parambikulam	TR	KE	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	PON <sup>+</sup>	Jan. 2006 <sup>†</sup>	Sashikumar <i>et al.</i> 2010a. <i>In press</i>
Muthuvarachal	Parambikulam	TR	KE	Chalakudy	DK	Dec. 2006	Nameer & Praveen 2007
Karanthodu	Vazhachal	RF	KE	Chalakudy	RS	Feb. 2008	Uthaman & Nameer 2008
Manampolly	Anamalais	WLS	TN	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	DR	Sep. 2009	Raju (2009)
Pooppara	Parambikulam	TR	KE	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	KGK	Dec. 2006	Nameer & Praveen 2007
Poringal	Vazhachal	RF	KE	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	KKA	Feb. 2008	Uthaman & Nameer 2008
Vazhachal	Vazhachal	RF	KE	Chalakudy	SKC	Feb. 2008 <sup>†</sup>	Uthaman & Nameer 2008
Anakkayam	Vazhachal	RF	KE	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	AB	Feb. 2008	Uthaman & Nameer 2008
Malakkappara	Vazhachal	RF	KE	Chalakudy <sup>†</sup>	PKU	Feb. 2008	Uthaman & Nameer 2008
Idamalayar	Malayattur	RF	KE	Periyar <sup>†</sup>	SPN	Jan. 2007 <sup>†</sup>	Sashikumar <i>et al.</i> 2010a. <i>In press</i>
Thattekkad <sup>+</sup>	Thattekkad	BS	KE	Periyar <sup>†</sup>	CSK <sup>+</sup>	Feb. 2009 <sup>†</sup>	Sashikumar <i>et al.</i> 2010b. <i>In press</i>
Aruvioda <sup>+</sup>	Periyar	TR	KE	Periyar <sup>†</sup>	DK <sup>+</sup>	Feb. 2008	Nameer <i>et al.</i> 2008
Mullakudy	Periyar	TR	KE	Periyar <sup>†</sup>	PJ*	Feb. 2008	Nameer <i>et al.</i> 2008
Tenmala <sup>+</sup>	Shendurney	WLS	KE	Kallada <sup>†</sup>	CSK <sup>+</sup>	May. 2009 <sup>†</sup>	Sashikumar <i>et al.</i> 2010b. <i>In press</i>

BS = Bird Sanctuary, RF = Reserve Forest, TR = Tiger Reserve, WLS = Wildlife Sanctuary.

**Observer acronyms:** AB=Amitabh Bachan, CG=Christopher G, CSK=C Sashikumar, DK=Dipu Karuthedathu, DR=David Raju, GT=Guruprasad Timappur, KGK=Karthik GK, KKA=Kishore KA, JB=J Balamurugan, PJ=Praveen J, PON=PO Nameer, PKU=PK Uthaman, SPN=S Prasanth Narayanan, RS=Raju S, SKC=Susanth Kumar C, SS=Sudhir Shivram, SSL=Santosh Saligram, SVT=S Vinaykumar Thimmappa, VC=Vijay Cavale, VMR=Vijay Mohan Raj.

The only known stronghold of *ichthyaelus* from southern India is the Kabini area on the Karnataka–Kerala border where it has been regularly observed and photographed. This region includes northern parts of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala (Sashikumar *et al.* 2010a. *In press.*), and Nagarhole National Park (Lethaby 2004; Aasheesh Pittie *in litt.* 5 March 2011), the adjacent regions in Bandipur National Park (Mohan 2007), and Kodagu district (Aasheesh Pittie *in litt.* 5 March 2011), all in Karnataka. It has also been photographed a few times from Kyathadevara Gudi in Biligiriranga Swamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka (Yathin 2005; Kulashekara 2007) even though ideal habitat for the bird does not exist inside the sanctuary (Prashanth N. S. *pers. comm.*, June 2010). Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka, seems to be the only area from where both species have been photographed conclusively (Vijay Mohan Raj *pers. comm.*, October 2010). A photograph from Chimmony Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala, in June 2008 is believed to be of *ichthyaelus* (Sashikumar *et al.* 2010a), and it has been subsequently observed there in September 2010 (Das 2010). A few recent reports of *I. ichthyaelus*, without proper photo-documentation, exist from Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary, Pala region, Vazhachal reserve forest (Sashikumar *et al.* 2010a), and Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary (Vijay Mohan Raj *pers. comm.* October 2010); however there have not been any repeat observations from these parts. In this context, the conservation significance of the Grey-headed Fish-Eagle swells much as the

species is decidedly rare and localised in southern India.<sup>1</sup>

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the observers listed in the table above for sharing their observations and photographs in public groups, bird surveys or by directly writing me, without which this note would not have materialised. Many thanks to S. Subramanya, Dipu Karuthedathu, C. Sashikumar, Vijay Mohan Raj, Nick Lethaby, and P. O. Nameer for reviewing this manuscript and providing useful comments which improved this short note greatly.

## References

- Balamurugan, J., 2010. Lesser Fish-Eagle at Mudumalai. TamilBirds <http://in.groups.yahoo.com/group/Tamilbirds/message/3284>. Accessed 20 March 2010.
- BirdLife International. 2010. Species factsheet: *Ichthyophaga humilis*. <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html>. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Das, S., 2010. Grey-headed Fish-Eagle from Chimmony. KeralaBirder <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/keralabirder/message/5355>.

1. Since the first draft of this manuscript, Lesser Fish-Eagle has been recorded from six new sites namely, three in Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary (December 2010), one in Peppara Wildlife Sanctuary (December 2010) and two in Malayattur reserve forest (February 2011) during organised bird surveys in Kerala while the Grey-headed Fish-Eagle was photo-documented from Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary (February 2011) by Mike Prince.

- Accessed on 23 September 2010.
- Kulashekara, C. S., 2009. Grey-headed Fish-Eagle IndiaNatureWatch. <http://www.indianaturewatch.net/displayimage.php?id=85487>; 18 March 2009. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Lethaby, N., 2005. The occurrence of Lesser Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* on the Cauvery River, Karnataka, India and some notes on the identification of this species. *BirdingAsia* 4: 33–38.
- Mohan, P., 2007. Grey headed Fish Eagle IndiaNatureWatch <http://www.indianaturewatch.net/displayimage.php?id=12959>; 5 April 2007. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Mohan Raj, V., 2010. Lesser Fish-Eagle from Bhadra Tiger Reserve. Bngbirds. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bngbirds/message/17439>; 14 January 2010.
- Naoraji, R., 2006. *Birds of prey of the Indian Subcontinent*. New Delhi: Om Books International.
- Nameer, P. O., & Nirmal, J. A., 2007a. *Birds of Peech-Vazhani*. Kerala Forest Department and Nature Education Society, Thrissur.
- Nameer, P. O., & Nirmal, J. A., 2007b. *Birds of Chimmony*. Kerala Forest Department and Nature Education Society, Thrissur.
- Nameer, P. O., & Praveen J. 2007. *Birds of Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary*. A report to Kerala Forest Department.
- Nameer, P. O., Praveen J. & Palot, M. J., 2008. *Birds of Periyar Tiger Reserve*. A report to Kerala Forest Department.
- Praveen, J. & Nameer, P. O., 2009. Monitoring bird diversity in Western Ghats of Kerala. *Current Science* 96 (10): 1390–1395.
- Raju, D., 2009. Wandering in Western Ghats. KeralaBirder <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/kerlabirder/message/4605>; 1 October 2009. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Saligram, S., 2007. Lesser Fish-Eagle, Ranganathittu. IndiaNatureWatch <http://www.indianaturewatch.net/displayimage.php?id=40906>; 28 February 2007. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Sashikumar, C., Praveen J., Palot, M. J., & Nameer, P. O., (In press.) Birds of Kerala: status and distribution. *Kottayam: DC Books*. 833 pp.
- Sashikumar, C., Vishnudas, C. K., Raju, S., Kannan, S., Vinayan, P. A., (In press.) Along the trail of Salim Ali: a study of avifauna, their habitat and ecological history. Travancore–Cochin Ornithological Survey 2009 Report. *A report of Kerala Forest Department*.
- Shivaram, S., 2008. LFE - To confirm ID, Ganeshgudi. IndiaNatureWatch. <http://www.indianaturewatch.net/displayimage.php?id=34973>; 3 January 2008. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Thimappa, S. V., 2010. Bandipur birds list. Bngbirds. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bngbirds/message/18341>; 7 June 2010. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Timappur, G., 2010. Re: Checklist - Birds in Manipal Bngbirds; 6 October 2010. Accessed on 3 October 2010.
- Uthaman, P. K., & Nameer, P. O., 2008. *Birds of Vazhachal Forest Division*. A report to Kerala Forest Department.
- Yathin, S., 2005. Grey-headed Fish Eagle at BRT. Bngbirds. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bngbirds/message/7724>; 25 February 2005; Accessed on 3 October 2010.

