

Book Review : Butterflies and Birds of Bishop Heber College

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Butterflies of Bishop Heber College

Author: A. Daisy Caroline Mary. Year of Publication: 2010. Publisher: Heber Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Bishop Heber College, Trichy. Price: Rs 100. and

Birds of Bishop Heber College

Author: A. Relton. Year of Publication: 2010. Publisher: Heber Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Bishop Heber College, Trichy. Price: Rs 150.

At a time when urbanization is taking a heavy toll of native species of plants and animals in towns and cities, institutional campuses have emerged as critical refuges of biodiversity in a wide range of landscapes. A common pattern of biodiversity conservation and enrichment that we see in most institutional campuses is one in which some rather resilient native species of plants and animals have survived the habitat transformation, creating niches for a gradual build up of biodiversity through the years. The secondary colonizers are often aided by human beings (such as exotic plants in gardens and arboreta) resulting in a significant increase in the number of species locally. Thus when equal areas of natural habitats and institutional campuses are compared, the latter are frequently richer in species.

Butterflies and birds are amongst the most adaptive terrestrial animals and are often the first to colonize habitats that have been considerably transformed. With the exception of a handful of habitat specialists, butterflies and birds are quite at home within urban campuses, provided there are trees, shrubs and herbs, meadows and water. Mobility is the key and it has contributed enormously to the colonization and survival of these elegant animals. Moreover, the best candidates for initiating people into becoming naturalists are butterflies and birds – primarily due to their attractive coloration and graceful flight. It is indeed very appropriate that the two books under review, published by the Heber Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies of the Bishop Heber College, have highlighted the diversity of these animals on the campus.

The authors of the two books are unique in being a talented and dedicated husband, wife and son trio. The family trio along with their colleagues and friends has really worked hard in putting together the nice photographs and text that we see in the two books. Congratulations!

Together the two books describe with photographs 74 species of butterflies and 62 species of birds that are found on the 27 acre Bishop Heber College Campus at Tiruchirapalli. Both books introduce the readers to some basic information on these organisms and their natural history apart from providing authentic species accounts. My overall rating of the two books is excellent. I also appreciate the fact that the forewords and prefaces have been written with some religious flavor. This is important as globally, starting with the famous Assisi Declaration of the 1980s, there has been a lot of stress on involving religious institutions in biodiversity conservation.

Before winding up, I wish to draw attention to a few errors/weaknesses noticed in the two publications, only with the intention of helping the authors while they work on future prints or editions and enlightening the serious readers. First, the butterfly book has stated that there are 28,000 species of butterflies in the world and in the very next page the number is given as 17,200! The latter comes closer to the

correct number. Elsewhere in the same book, the illustration titled 'Butterfly Anatomy' would have better been 'Parts of a Butterfly'. Further, Mullerian mimicry has not been explained correctly.

About the bird book, I found the specific details provided in the preface of how many birds were shot and consumed by the author, avoidable. A number of naturalists and conservationists, including Salim Ali, were indeed trigger-happy hunters before the transformation! Second, species accounts should have focused more on a layout (similar to the one adopted by the butterfly book) that draws attention to the bird illustrated. There is generally an overdose of text. Third, providing nesting details of birds that do not breed on the campus can be misleading.

Two well-prepared books at reasonable prices should do well in initiating more people to the world of butterflies and birds. I once again congratulate the authors, their team of naturalists and photographers and the publishers for the good effort.

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