

Raveendran Natarajan

- From Engineering to Education and Birding

On the morning of 23rd December 2022, the fellows of the RHATC 22–23 batch with Dr. Sanjay Molur and H. Byju started our journey to Rameshwaram. Sometime in the journey, we had to pick up a person from Madurai who was Byju's friend and would help and guide us in Rameshwaram. We realised what a privileged lot we were to meet such a resourceful person, Raveendran, who is making a change, only after we went to Rameshwaram and got to spend four days with him.

Raveendran Natarajan is an engineer by education, who turned into a birder. He has completed a Diploma in Electrical and Electronics Engineering from Tamil Nadu Polytechnic University and worked as a service engineer in ELGI for seven years before shifting careers. Raveendran was really close to his niece – Amrita, who was an excellent student, studied veterinary science, and got many awards for her conservation efforts, passion, and dedication.

She wanted to work at Singapore Zoo, learn their methods and then come back to India after the age of 35 to work with the zoos here. She had even designed a work plan for Raveendran and her to work on together. Unfortunately, she passed away at a very young age due to cancer. Amrita's demise deeply affected Raveendran, and he decided to continue her legacy by establishing 'Iragukal – Amrita Nature Trust' in 2014. Iragukal also means 'feather' in Tamil, what better name for a trust lead by a birder. Amrita, along





with Raveendran's brother (who is a shell collector and has collected around 3,000 different species of Indo-Pacific region) encouraged him to take up an ornithology course at the Bombay Natural History Society. With his passion for birds, guts to leave his engineering job at ELGI, and Amrita's dream, Raveendran decided to educate children and teachers about birds and biodiversity through Iragukal.

His goal is to educate 10,000 kids every year, and he has been achieving this goal for more than six years now. He tries to educate as many female students as he can, as he believes that, 'If you teach a boy, you only teach an individual. But when you teach a girl, you don't only teach an entire family, but three generations'. Besides this, he also educates teachers about local biodiversity as when teachers are themselves passionate, knowledgeable, and trained about biodiversity and wildlife, they can teach it better to their students. Citizen science is the future and the hope of conservation, and hence involving schools, colleges, teachers, and locals is the first

step to acknowledge and appreciate biodiversity to ultimately conserve it.

Besides his work in capacity building, Raveendran's personal passion for birds is doing great service to the birds and other biodiversity of Tamil Nadu. He initiated a community bird count in January 2015 to celebrate birds during Pongal.

During our stay with Raveendran in his field station in Rameshwaram, he told us about how he and his friend Ravi, a veterinary doctor used to go from village to village on a bike to study species like woodcock and other migratory birds in the area. They could find sites and ponds where these birds were even seen on roadsides, and near human settlements. They found out important pathways for certain species to migrate from Ramnad to Sri Lanka. With the help of this information, he and his friend H. Byju, decided to work together, bring in scientific methods in their surveys and study to determine the different aspects of population decline in birds of Tamil Nadu. Being a native to the area it helped

them understand the landscape and by knowing the local language and how to interact with people; they were able to convince the local communities of Ramnad and the forest department to participate in population census. The forest department was more than happy to help them as they had more population data than the department, thanks to their standalone research on bike.

Asian Waterbird Census also conducts ‘Wetland Bird Census’ every year through BNHS, but they didn’t do it in all areas. Again, Raveendran’s personally collected data helped not only facilitate, but enhance this census by filling in data gaps. He himself recorded more than 256 species of birds in Madurai, as opposed to the official data of 170, recorded in the 1970s.

Ravindran has spotted many rare migratory birds like Egyptian Vulture, White Stork, Blue Throat, Siberian Stonechat, Common Stonechat, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Brown-tailed Grassbird, Laggar Falcon, and Lesser Kestrel. He is also the first person to record a Himalayan Griffon in Tamil Nadu and an Arctic Squaw (with Byju) in Dhanushkodi, Gulf of Mannar. He, along with Byju has proposed many potential bird sanctuaries in areas in and between Madurai and Rameshwaram – including Kodandaramar/Dhanushkodi Bird Sanctuary in Dhanushkodi, and Kilasagar in Valnokam area (for flamingos). His findings and data are priceless for bird research and conservation in Tamil Nadu, and he, on the shoulders of previous records of 1980s along with the knowledge of some experienced researchers and his personal findings, might publish fresh bird records for the area in 2023 with Byju.

Besides his priceless contribution to education, data collection and conservation, Raveendran has also helped people come closer to nature during covid. He organised free online classes called ‘Mr. Owl’s Classroom’, spread across 102 days for school and college students, to teach them about biodiversity, environment, flora, fauna, and migration. Students not only from India, but also from Myanmar, Qatar, and United States joined in. During lockdown, he engaged entire families and exposed them to birds

and other biodiversity so that people have a way to appreciate and get close to nature in tough times.

Back in Rameshwaram, over dinner he once told us about an inspiring story of a man who was laid off from a prestigious airline during lockdown. The man had gotten into alcoholism and due to this, his family relations were getting bitter. His family then planned a birdwatching trip with Raveendran and the trip impacted him so positively that not only did he leave alcohol, but also became a full-time birder.

Raveendran and his team need more people who are passionate and who understand conservation. In our trip, we could see the wonder in his eyes even when he saw the different marine species or even tarantulas in a tamarind grove. He reminds us that the sense of wonder and attraction towards nature and biodiversity is the driving fuel towards conservation. Although, natural habitats are getting destroyed in the name of development, we have to take a look at the existing biodiversity and understand and appreciate it in order to conserve it. There is still a lot to save, and it can only happen when more and more ecosystems are declared protected, and citizens learn to appreciate biodiversity. Rameshwaram is a pilgrimage site and tourism will never stop there, but to conserve the biological jewels there, we need to promote the biodiversity found in Rameshwaram in terms of birds, migratory routes, marine life and much more. We need more people like Raveendran and citizen scientists with passion, discipline, punctuality, understanding of the importance of biodiversity, and scientific temper to conserve biodiversity in Gulf of Mannar and Tamil Nadu.

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