

Beauty of the Beast

THE ORIENTAL DWARF KINGFISHER



WINGED JEWEL OF INDIA'S WESTERN GHATS

A precious encounter with the stunningly colorful bird regales wonderful emotions and fond memories to passionate photographer Megh Roy Choudhury



Ceyx erithaca

The Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher *Ceyx erithaca*, also known as the Black-backed Kingfisher or Three-toed kingfisher, is a small species belonging to the *Alcedinidae* family. The ODK is a small, red and yellow kingfisher, averaging 13 cm (5.1 in) in length, with yellow underparts and glowing bluish-black upperparts. The Rufous-backed Kingfisher is sometimes considered a subspecies.

TEXTS AND PHOTOS
BY MEGH ROY CHOUDHURY



Ceyx erithaca

The preferred habitat of this species is small streams in densely shaded forests. In the Konkan region of Southwest India, it breeds with the onset of southwest monsoon in June. The nest is a horizontal tunnel up to a metre in length.

I wait. I wait with a bated breath. I sit like a monk, in absolute silence, ensconced in a dream world. The sound of rain surrounds me with a harmonic drumming. Pearly droplets bounce off my skin, as sparkly and effervescent as champagne bubbles. Silver trickles of water fall and run down on the shiny leaves, before lazily cascading down to mother earth. A heavenly earthen aroma fills the air, permeating deep into my senses. A surging stream gurgles joyously over the rocks before plunging into a small gorge. The lush green of the evergreen trees completes the fairy tale ambiance. The scenario is picture perfect for my long awaited rendezvous with one of the Almighty's most breathtaking creations!!! As I pray for the heavenly outpour to show some mercy, the rain god relents and chords of soft light filters through the barely perceivable gaps in the dense canopy. A red and orange missile whizzes through the still air and drops anchor on a branch in front of me. For an infinitesimal moment my entire world freezes. Sitting right in front of me is the Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher. "The Jewel of the Western Ghats" and one of the birds I wanted to have a glimpse of, before I breathe my last ! It is without an iota of doubt, one of the most exquisite birds in the world. A rainbow would be deeply abashed to even compete with this jazzy bird. As my eyes hungrily feast

on the kaleidoscopic beauty, I feel a profound sense of euphoria like never before.

More drama is yet to unfold! The proud parents have built up a nest on the sloping banks of the stream and have their young ones anticipating a luscious meal. Prey after prey is caught and dished out to the hatchlings, which have a truly humungous appetite. Skinks, spiders, crabs, frogs and other creatures run helter-skelter to escape the wrath of these highly proficient hunters. Periodically, like a clockwork, either of the parents arrive at the nest, always clutching the next course of the meal. It always as a rule lands on the same perch and spends some time catching its breath. Some acrobatic moves are on display on the branch and often it bobs its head up and down like a Chinese doll. The next instant, it takes off and darts inside the nest. While the fledgelings devour their munchies, some heartfelt family moments are spent, some pearls of wisdom conveyed to the progeny. Then in a flurry of motion, the kingfisher flies out of the nest, relentless in the pursuit of its next target.

Almost as an afterthought, I start photographing these magnificent specimens of nature. It is an utterly exhausting effort to wield a camera



Ceyx erithaca

The clutch of four or five eggs hatches in 17 days with both the male and female incubating. The birds fledge after 20 days and a second brood may be raised if the first fails. The young are fed with geckos, skinks, crabs, snails, frogs, crickets, and dragonflies.

in such testing circumstances. Light is almost nonexistent and rain, which can start pouring cruelly and incessantly, creates a difficult situation to any photographer. A poor umbrella spread over my head makes a valiant effort to keep the nature's fury in check, often failing miserably. Camera and lenses have been draped in a watertight fashion as a secondary line of defense. Unheard of ISO and shutter speeds come into play, as I strive to fashion a respectable image of this resplendent treasure.

As I sit there underneath my makeshift accommodation and wait for the next foray of the kingfisher, I start reminiscing about my journey to this paradisiacal habitat. The awe-inspiring odyssey to this place weaves through the mystical Western Ghats, a magical land of verdant greenery. Torrential rain, innumerable waterfalls and dense green forest create an enchanting visual extravaganza. The beaten paths are encompassed by the colossal cerulean mountains, which appear to extend till the heaven. I feel I am on the top of the world as we saunter through the cloud covered soaring hills and abyssal valleys. One feels like stopping the vehicle and soak in the beauty of nature.

A pleasant intrusion to my dreamy reverie comes in, when the kingfisher disembarks again with a catch of a multicolored skink. Bewitched as ever, I go on a clicking spree. My eyes can't get enough of this tiny soul, which keeps me spellbound again and again. Two captivating, gleeful days in this cradle of

nature just fly by. The whole escapade makes me blissfully buoyant and supremely confident as I come through some of the most grueling conditions known to man. The realization that I have successfully accomplished the photographic documentation of this elusive bird also fills me with fathomless joy. I thank God one more time for inculcating in me, this love for nature and the passion for the wild. Wholly content and sated I head home, these unforgettable moments indelibly etched into my memory.

Chiplun, a tiny hamlet situated deep in the heart of the Konkan, is around 240 kms from Pune. Nishikant Tambe (fondly known as Nandu) is a true conservationist at heart. To him the Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher is the prime priority and it is treated like royalty. Any compromises which can harm the bird are not at all tolerated. Nests are not disturbed at any cost and a strict code of does and don'ts are conveyed to every photographer. A nominal amount collected by him wouldn't even cover the cost of two days of home stay and the delicious food served by his family members. You always end up admiring his intense fondness and dedication towards the ODKFs, which appear to relish the attention showered on them and are thriving in large numbers. I'm sincerely happy that these birds ultimately have found a safe haven in this tiny spot amidst the widely spread Western Ghats.



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A widespread resident of lowland forest, this species is endemic across much of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. It is found in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.