



Nature stories for young readers

FINDING THE COPPERSMITH

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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Online

A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION



The story is based on observations made at an institutional campus in South Delhi during the months of April - June 2013.

Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.



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“Look out!” I screamed, utterly shocked. I had never seen anything like this before. A Brown-headed Barbet tried to grab and pull out a small bird from its hole and in the process pulled out quite a few of its feathers.

Was the small bird hurt? Can it fly again? I was anxious and waited with bated breath.





I needn't have worried. Within seconds, it emerged and flew away completely ignoring the Brown-headed Barbet who remained perched at the very same spot.

I stood there waiting to see what the Brown-headed Barbet would do next. Sure enough, he was up to mischief. Moving up to the hole, he began widening it!

“Ho! Ho, you can't do that. Go to your hole. How many do you need anyway?” I exclaimed in surprise. I had seen a Brown-headed Barbet nesting last year in another hole in

the same tree. Assuming that this was the same Barbet, I wondered why this bird was looking for a new hole. The bird silently continued his hole widening activity. But I didn't give up.

“Hey! Get away from there. Go to your hole. How many do you need anyway?” I repeated.

“How does it matter to you? And what are you doing here?” asked the bully Barbet sternly, turning around and looking at me squarely.





“Oh... you see, I am looking for a bird,” I answered boastfully. “I am in the habit of observing birds. Have been doing so for some years now and I know all about you and many other birds. I also know that your –”

The bully showed no interest in my explanation and continued chipping away at the hole.

And SUDDENLY:

The Persian Lilac tree, now entirely covered with fresh leaves after the flowering season, became full of action.

The small bird, the one that got its feathers pulled out, was joined by another similar one and they started chasing the Brown-headed Barbet. With a harsh hissing call, they tried to threaten him.

The scuffle ended as quickly as it started and all was peaceful once again. I sighed with relief!

But not for long. The small hissing birds took every opportunity to threaten any creature that dared come anywhere close to their hole. A pair of Brahminy Mynas and a Common Myna received similar threats.





A lot of hissing calls, chases and flying around.

The Brown-headed Barbet must have got a bit ruffled. He flew away but returned soon. Lady Barbet joined him and both went about examining the other hole in the trunk, the one they had nested in last year.

BUT, out of that hole emerged a squirrel!

“Ah!” I exclaimed, “That explains everything. The Brown-headed Barbets are holeless!”

I felt sad for the Barbets and admonished the squirrel for being an intruder and troubling the Barbets.

**“How does it matter to you? What are you doing here?”
Asked the squirrel angrily.**

“Oh!” I said, “I am looking –”

Without waiting for my reply, the squirrel very industriously began gathering bark strips, rolling them up and hurrying back to the hole.





I was amused. So many animals and all so busy! As I stood watching all the action, a Common Myna flew in and perched on a branch close to the small hole. The small bird arrived almost immediately with a beakful of ripe goolar figs, some three of them packed in her stout beak. She was horrified. She had to pass this BIG Myna to get to her hole. In there must be her chicks, hungry.

Cautiously, she slid, closer... closer... and closer to Myna. And each time, she paused to see if Myna would harm her. She tensed up her forehead to flare out her red feathers

threateningly. A sideward look at Myna, a quick slide across the branch, a pause, another look and another slide. She finally got to her hole. One last look over her shoulder, another flaring up of her red feathers ... and a dash – into her hole she went!

“Phew!” I was relieved. I asked Myna, as politely as I could, to move away and not threaten the small bird.

Myna looked at me coldly and demanded, “What are you doing here?”





“I am looking for a small green bird. Magpie Robin –”

“Magpie Robins! They are not green!”

“Noooo... Lady Magpie Robin told me to look for a small green bird.”

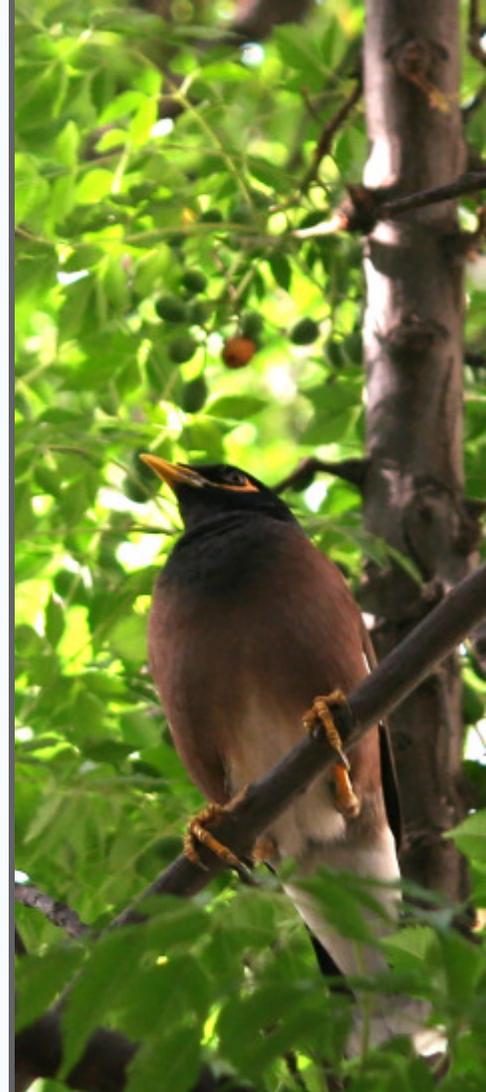
“Oh... whatever for?” Asked Myna.

“For I had to... I have been looking... for a very long time now... well... not exactly... may be for two months... or three, I – ”

“Okay... okay, do what you want. Go on and look for your bird, by all means,” Myna said impatiently and stayed put on the branch.

What I wanted to tell Myna was that my search for the small green bird had been a long one. Almost three months long.

It is strange how birds are quiet in winters. Not much calling and not much talking. But as days get warmer, they get noisier and noisier. Amidst all the bird talk, there was one call I could hear but never did I get to see the bird.





The call goes like '*tuk ... tuk ... tuk ...*'

I began hearing this call early in February, but then, the bird would not call very often or for too long. But by mid March, I could hear it louder and clearer. I knew everything about the *tuks*. It would begin low, and rise to a uniform pitch. I had even timed it once. A full minute. Non-stop. I was breathless when it stopped! And the *tuks* were always equally spaced.

One day, I think sometime in late April, I heard the bird behind my apartment and rushed downstairs. And there,

I saw Mr. Magpie Robin singing away. He had been driving me crazy too and I was furious. Every day, at first light, he would get into a full throated recital. Sleepily, I would look down from my window to see him perched always on the same tree. Mostly on the same dead branch. And he would go on and on.

“Can't you SHUT UP,” I had demanded angrily, forgetting what I had come for. The poor bird was so startled that he had become speechless, or songless I should say.

Lady Magpie Robin who was getting into her hole had





stopped by to inform me that Mr. Magpie Robin was not supposed to shut up at that time of the year. And while Mr. Magpie Robin had dutifully re-started his song, she had explained that birds have plenty to communicate during the nesting season and there would always be a lot of singing and calling. She had also explained the difference between bird songs and calls. While Mr. Magpie Robin can sing, Lady Magpie Robin can only call!

As we chatted, I had mentioned to her my unsuccessful attempts at identifying the '*tuk ... tuk ... tuk*' bird.

“Why! THAT IS the Coppersmith. Don’t Coppersmiths sound like coppersmiths hammering copper, *tuk ... tuk ... tuk?*” Lady Magpie Robin had asked and when I looked perplexed, had added, “a small green bird... Coppersmith is a small green bird; indeed a Barbet with barbets at the base of its beak. All Barbets have barbets, you see!” But she was not sure if Coppersmith sang or called.

And that’s how I began looking for a small green bird. It has been a very tough search. Funnily, every time I get closer to where I think the *tuk-tuks* are coming from, they





seem to be coming from somewhere else!

“Look!” Myna exclaimed suddenly. “A green bird! Small enough?” She guffawed uncontrollably. I did not like the teasing but looked up nevertheless.

Father Roseringed Parakeet had just landed on a high branch. I was amazed at what happened next. Mother Roseringed Parakeet, with no rose or black ring whatsoever unlike Father Roseringed Parakeet, flew up to him. I stood there open-mouthed and watched as he transferred food to her.

“Wow!” I said, “This is good fun! This is regurgitation!”

But that was not all! After stuffing herself with all the food, she flew to a hole.

“Another hole! Another nest!” I exclaimed, excitedly.

I watched the two step feeding process and wondered why Father Parakeet did not himself feed the chicks.

I blurted out immediately: “What a crazy thing to do! Don't you know how to feed chicks?”





“What are you doing here? Mind your business!” Was the gruff reply I got.

“Exactly! I AM ON BUSINESS. Looking for a small green bird,” I said, appearing as important as I could. “ I am looking for the Coppersmith.”

Looking at me coldly, Father Parakeet asked, “Do you know HOW to look for WHAT you are looking for?”

I stared blankly, trying to understand the question. And the very next second, I was bombarded by more questions!

By every single bird on that tree:

“How small?”

“Sparrow size?”

“...or smaller?”

“Green... Fully?”

“Cannot be... how green? What green?”

“Short beak? ...Stout? Thin-curved?”

I looked on helplessly. All I was trying to do was look for a small green bird that says *tuk ... tuk ... tuk*. I never thought the search would be so difficult or that it would





get me into so much trouble.

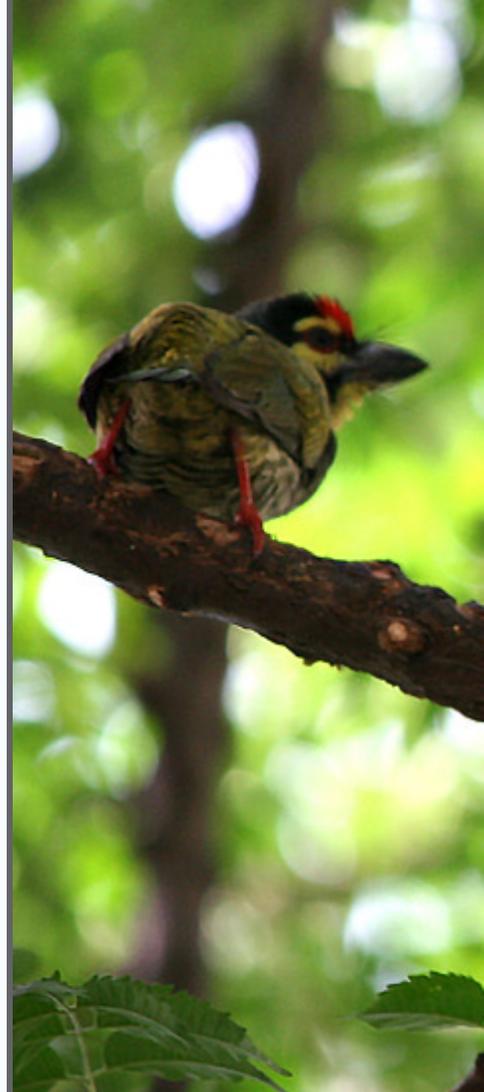
“Oh! There she is. She could be of some help!” yelled out Myna pointing out to Lady Magpie Robin who was enjoying a bath in the collected water by a tap a short distance away from us. For some strange reason, all the birds who had questioned me seemed to be amused. It almost appeared as though they were making fun of me.

The commotion had interrupted Lady Robin’s bath and she hopped along to find out what it was all about. With

everybody trying to explain at the same time, it was not at all easy for her to understand what was going on. She tried to listen patiently but was interrupted when there was another hissing attack, this time to chase away the squirrel.

Lady Magpie Robin turned towards me brightly and was about to say something when I heard it again.

“Tuk ... tuk ...”





But from where? I could not say clearly.

Lady Magpie Robin heard it too. She sighed deeply, paused and looked at the hissing bird, no longer hissing but perched calming near her nest. Then taking a deep breath she said, “Will you convey a message to the Crow? The one nesting on the Peepul tree behind your apartment. Tell her a Koel is eying her nest.”

I set forth immediately to convey the urgent warning, without pausing to wonder why she didn't fly up herself

to warn the crow. I quickly ran up the four flights of steps and got on to the terrace.

There, I stared open-mouthed. On the slender topmost branch of a Subabool tree was perched a bird, identical to the small hissing bird, head bobbing this way and that, throat puffing in and out, rhythmically, *tuk... tuk... tukking*.

The errand was just an excuse. Lost in admiration, I silently thanked Lady Magpie Robin.





Meet the characters: The Brown-headed Barbets...



The Roseringed Parakeets...



Lady Magpie Robin...



Coppersmith Barbet – the small green bird!



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