

Nature stories for young readers



THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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Vidya
Online

A PARTNERSHIP FOR TEACHERS, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION



The story is based on observations made at Sanjay Van, part of South Delhi's Ridge forest and the neighbouring residential area in the months of April - July 2010.

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



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“Hey! You are lucky,” I called out to a pair of Redvented Bulbuls nesting in our Mulberry tree.

“In what way,” asked Mother Bulbul.

“Your eggs hatched and theirs haven’t!”





“Whose?”

“Redwattled Lapwing’s.”

“What happened? Have they abandoned their eggs?”

“No, no... no. They haven’t.”

I told her how I had discovered a Redwattled Lapwing’s nest and how I had observed the birds regularly incubating eggs. One parent stands guard

while the other sits on the eggs. And if by chance a dog or somebody comes close by, the incubating bird quietly gets up and sneaks away so that the eggs remain unnoticed. But both birds would always be found near the eggs.

“Well, in that case, the eggs will hatch,” said the bird flying away to get food for her hungry mouths.

Lady Bulbul had laid three eggs in a small but beautiful nest. A neat hemispherical cup of fine





sticks. Small enough to fit into my cupped palms. Like the Lapwing's eggs, they were marked with blotches and spots. The eggs were pale pink with brownish red and purplish markings. But unlike the Lapwing's eggs, they were small and almost oval.

I waited for the bird to return and the minute she arrived, I continued:

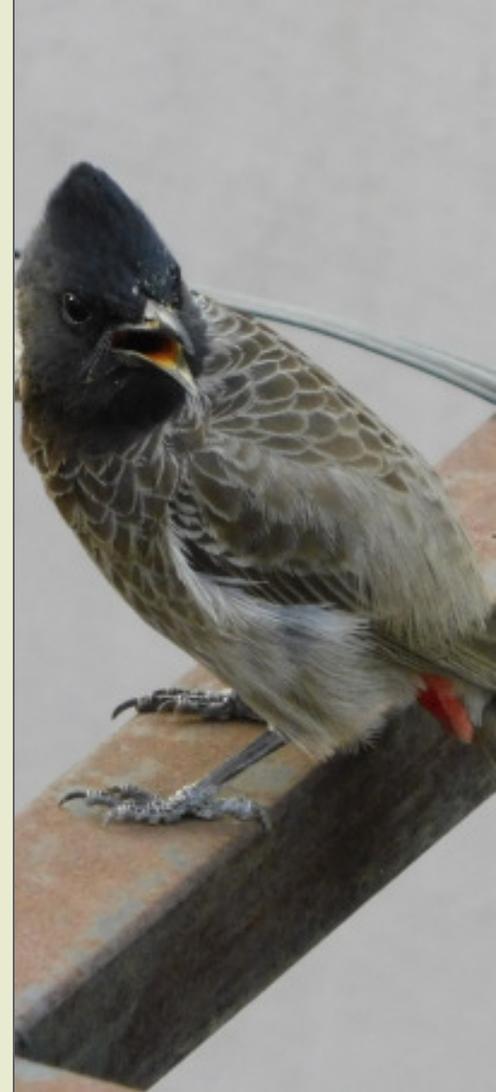
"Your eggs hatched in less than two weeks. Lapwing's eggs are much bigger than your's. I don't

know if bigger eggs take longer to hatch. I am keeping track of the days. It's a month now! That's a bit too long."

"When did you last see the eggs?" Asked the bird.

"Two days ago. And I gave up. I don't think they will ever hatch."

"Just when you shouldn't have given up! Run along and check again. Don't forget to take your





binoculars," advised the bird.

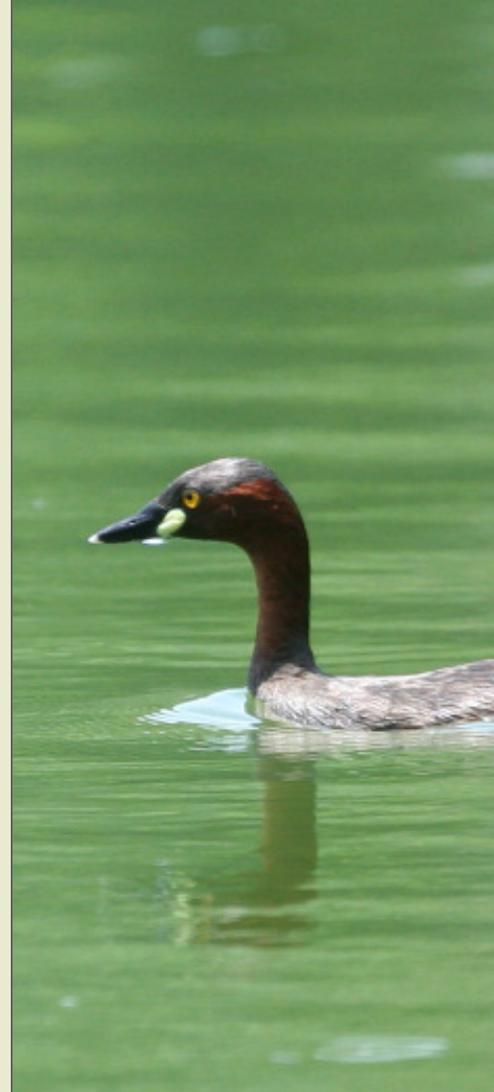
"Okay," I said halfheartedly. Besides, how would the binoculars help? I wondered.

Lapwings nest on the ground. They look for a natural depression or make one themselves and arrange stones, mud clods, grass and sticks around the depression in a sort of a random way and lay four eggs that look so much like the stones around them. The eggs are perfectly camouflaged and if at all

somebody does see them, with or without the binoculars, it is purely by luck.

“The eggs are GONE! All of them. Somebody must have picked them up or eaten them ... not a trace ... just NOTHING!” I shouted breathlessly when I got to the nest.

“What’s all this noise about,” asked a small duck like bird swimming rapidly towards me in great annoyance.





“The eggs are gone!” I replied hesitantly, “I thought they would never hatch. They were lying here for such a long time! And now they are gone!”

“Why would eggs not hatch,” demanded the bird.

“I... the Bulbul’s –” I stopped open-mouthed.

I had not paid much attention to the bird. Now that I did, I was astonished at what I saw.

“Who is that on your back? Your chick?” I asked.

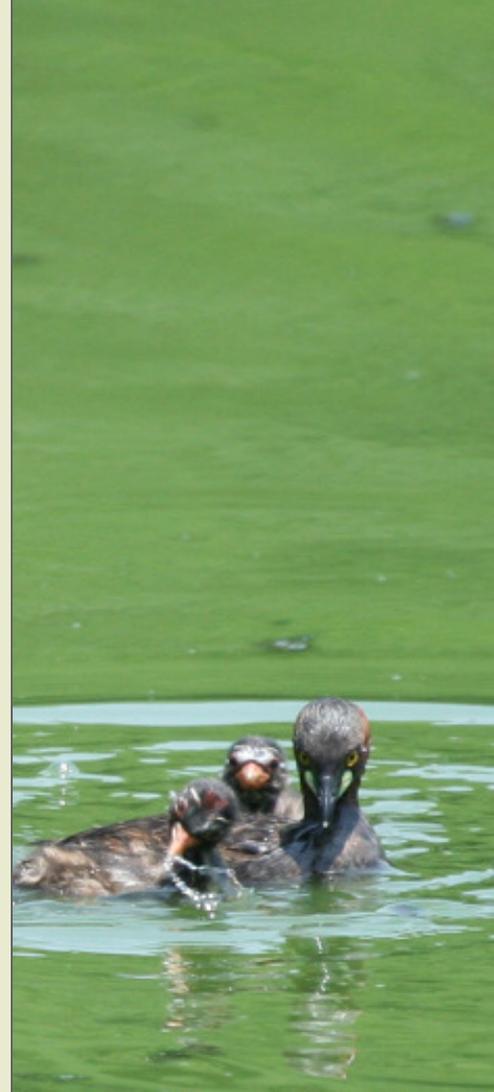
“Yes of course. I have two of them riding on me. The one here, hatched today.”

“TODAY!”

“You are shouting again!” The bird admonished.

“Your chick... just a day old. Eyes open and has feathers too!”

I told her about the Bulbul’s day old chicks. They



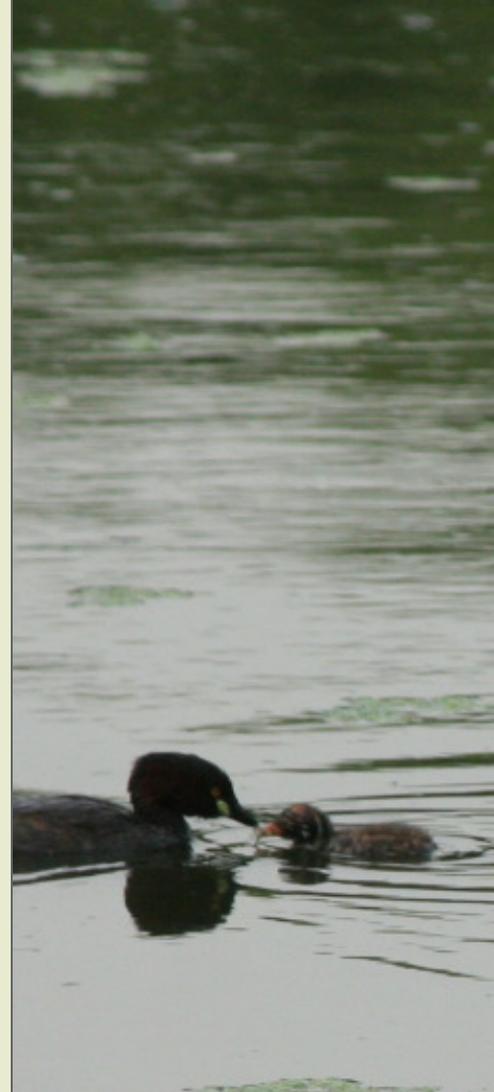


were totally featherless and looked raw all over. Their eyes were closed and not yet formed; just bulges. All they could do was gape or make feeble sounds.

“Oh! I now understand what’s troubling you. You shouldn’t expect all chicks to be like the Bulbul’s. *Precocial* is the word. Lapwing chicks are precocial and ours are almost precocial,” said the bird, as she swam away with her two chicks tucked safely under her wings.

What the bird said made no sense.

With nothing else to do, I sat down and watched the little family swim away. The binoculars came in handy! Every now and then, the chicks would slip off their mother's back and swim with her. How fast they could swim! If mother found some food, she would turn back and feed her chicks. Sometimes, another adult, perhaps the father would come over and feed them. The older ones swam about looking for food on their own.





“Oh! How many of these birds! The lake is full of them. Wonder what they are called,” I said to myself scanning the lake end to end.

“A LAPWING!”

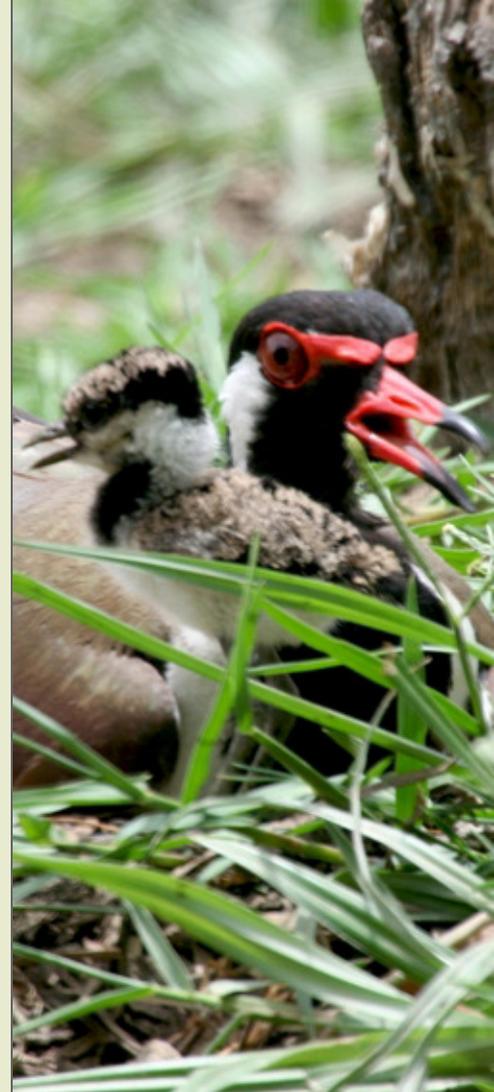
I could not help shouting.

On a grassy mound at the far end of the lake was a Lapwing squatting in the typical way she does while incubating; with the beak half open and breathing

heavily. The bird was at her watchful best. Another nest. Another discovery! I was thrilled. But surprised at what I saw. A tiny chick walked over to the Lapwing and snuggled beneath her. Is that her chick? After a while, the mother got up and walked away. The chick trailed the mother confidently.

My head was bursting with questions.

I looked around and called out, "Hey! What's your name? Can you please come back here for a second?"





“Dabchick. Also called the Little Grebe. Now what is it,” asked the bird coming closer, this time without her chicks.

“Is that the Lapwing’s chick?” I asked, almost in a whisper.

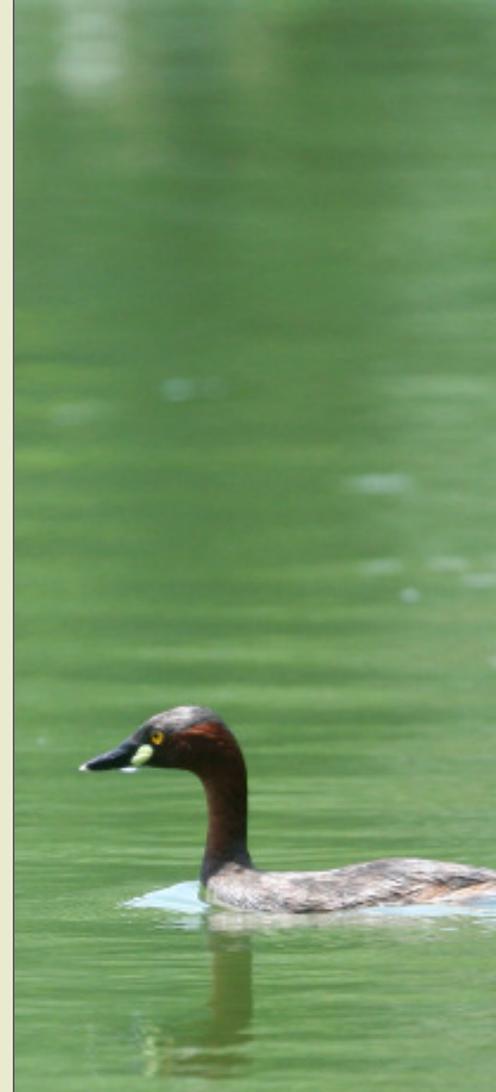
“Yes,” said the bird matching my whisper and continued, “One egg hatched yesterday. Most probably the rest will hatch today. As and when chicks dry up and feel strong enough to stand, their

parents lead them away from the nest to a place where they can find food and eat on their own.”

“Oh! Then... THIS nest is empty because...”

“Yes, yes... They hatched a couple of days ago. Look, the entire family is over there.”

As I tried to follow the Dabchick’s gaze, she called out excitedly, “Look! Use your binoculars. Mother Lapwing has collected her chicks and is brooding.”





“Ho... Ho! A Lapwing with ten legs!” I could not help exclaiming. I had never seen anything like this! Mother Lapwing was half sitting. I could see her yellow legs. And four pairs of grey legs sticking out!

“Brooding. That’s the way she hides her chicks?”

“No..., that’s the way she keeps them warm.”

Swimming away, the bird called back, “Lapwings’ chicks are also well camouflaged! One warning call

from their parents and they squat down motionless!
Watch carefully, or you will miss them.”

“You are not lucky after all!” I told the Bulbul when I got back. “Lapwings don’t tire themselves like you, feeding their chicks.”

“Ha,” said the bird haughtily. “We need to look after our chicks for less than 20 days. They can then fly and be on their own. Our young ones are safer when they can fly. And Lapwing chicks take much much





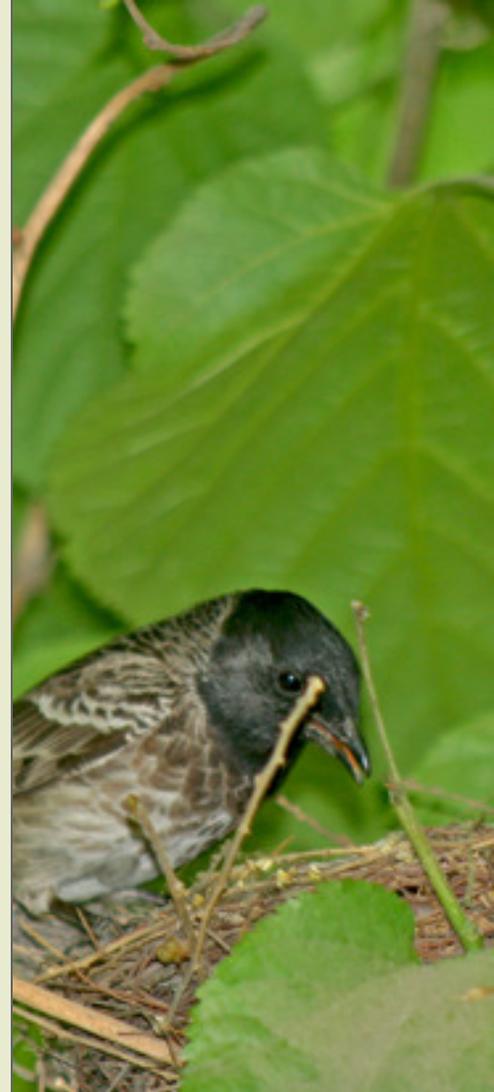
more than a month to fly! Until then, their parents spend sleepless nights and restless days; warning and protecting them. From predator birds and animals. Or from people who may squash them up unknowingly.”

“Oh! Now who is luckier! Difficult to say,” I said shaking my head slowly.

Is it easier to look after blind helpless chicks or precocial chicks like the Lapwing’s? Confused and

undecided, I asked, “If Lapwing’s chicks are precocial,
what are yours?”

“Altricial !” said the Bulbul.





Meet the chicks



Bulbul chicks; day 01



Bulbul chicks; day 06



Bulbul chicks; day 11; Ready to leave the nest



Dabchick chicks



Dabchick chick (older)



Redwattled Lapwing chick; day 01



Redwattled Lapwing chick (older)



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