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A preliminary study of the Indian edible-nest swiftlet colonies in the Ohiya area

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Railway lines of Sri Lanka developed in the last two centuries consist of numerous tunnels, some of which are habitats to the Indian Edible-nest Swift (*Collocalia unicolor*). It is a cave dweller that spends the day time in flight as large flocks. Its nests are harvested throughout Asia and exported for medicinal purposes including for the making of the popular bird nest soup. Harvesting of the nests is a major threat to the survival of *Collocalia unicolor* in Sri Lanka. This preliminary study was conducted to assess their current status and the human impacts on the natural habitats in the Ohiya area, and make suggestions for conservation. The study area was 14 tunnels (T-22 to T-35) between Ohiya (230 km post) and Idalgashinna (237 km post). The elevation of the area is 1600 m – 1771 m, annual average temperature is 15 – 25 °C, and annual average rainfall is 1500 mm – 2000 mm. The area is in the periphery of the Horton Plain National Park and the Thangamalie Sanctuary. Tunnel lengths were recorded according to the tunnel number assigned by the railway department. Bird populations and the nests were counted during mornings and evenings along 10 m strips, at a height of 1 – 3.5 m within the tunnels, over a period of three months. Field notes were made on the colonies, surrounding area and habitats (abandoned nests, feces collection, moisture on walls and human activities). Data collected showed high population densities (T-28, 100.6 m in length and has 3.8 mating pairs per m²) where tunnels were longer than 80 m. Nests were clustered in dark places. During day time only a few birds occupy the tunnel and only a few parent birds are found in their nests. During the evening after 1800 hrs, the longer tunnels hold 3 – 5 mating pairs per m² (approximately in a tunnel 4 mating pairs per m²) in various stages of nest building. During the sampling period, large numbers of nests were noted to be harvested illegally from the sites, as recorded by the markings on the wall. Abandoned nests were seen on the ground and some nests were destroyed by rain that had penetrated through the tunnel wall. Only freshly made nests had been removed by stalkers. Attention given by the railway department or forest department to control nest harvesting is not satisfactory. According to previous studies, the harvesting of nests obstructs or delays breeding and sometime causes the death of female birds. Though the relevant government departments have been made aware, nest harvesting still occurs significantly. Attention given by the railway department or forest department to control nest harvesting is not satisfactory. Therefore, creating awareness and development, and imposing strict regulations are required to conserve the Indian edible-nest swiftlet.