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Cover: Oil painting of Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*. © R. Mahesh.



## New breeding record of Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* from Malappuram District, Kerala, India

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The Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* is a medium-sized wader under the family Threskiornithidae of order Pelecaniformes (BirdLife International 2024). It inhabits freshwater marshes, lakes, rivers, flooded grasslands, paddy fields, tidal creeks, mudflats, mangroves, salt marshes, and lagoons (Sundar 2006; Sundar & Kittur 2013) and hunt in shallow water areas (Chaudhury & Koli 2018). Black-headed Ibis is also known as Black-necked Ibis, Indian White Ibis, Oriental White Ibis (BirdLife International 2024). The species exhibits an extensive biogeographic range across the Asian continent (Chaudhury & Koli 2018). The IUCN Red List assessments of 2004, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2016 classified the species as 'Near Threatened'. There is a notable improvement in the global conservation status of Black-headed Ibis over recent years; it was upgraded to 'Least Concern' category in the 2024 assessment (BirdLife International 2024).

Breeding records of Black-headed Ibis from Kerala remain geographically sparse. Previously reported breeding records of Black-headed Ibis from the state include Panamaram Heronry in Wayanad (Balakrishnan & Thomas 2004), Kumarakom in Kottayam (Narayanan et al. 2006), Manthakad in Palakkad (Roshnath et al. 2017), Mavoor Wetlands in Kozhikode (Shifa 2021), and Thirunavaya Wetlands in Malappuram District

(Chullakattil 2022). Successful captive breeding of the Black-headed Ibis at Thiruvananthapuram Zoo has been reported previously (Bindya et al. 2019). New breeding records are valuable for understanding local population trajectories and habitat use. In this study, we document a new breeding colony of Black-headed Ibis from Malappuram District, Kerala, and examine its relevance to regional population expansion.

An active breeding colony was observed on 04<sup>th</sup> November 2025 at Edavannappara (11.246° N, 75.977° E) in Malappuram District of Kerala, India (Figure 1 & Image 1). Three active nests with seven chicks were built on higher branches of a mature *Alstonia scholaris* tree. The nests were constructed of twigs and leaves of common plants, mainly *Alstonia scholaris*, which had plastic ropes integrated into its structure, which is an indication of anthropogenic contamination of the surrounding environment. In one nest, an adult was observed bringing new twigs with fresh leaves from *Alstonia Scholaris* and incorporating them into the existing structure. Observation was done using a binocular (SOLOGNAC 8x25) and photographs were taken using Nikon Z6II camera with Nikkor Z 180-600 mm lens. The nest height from the ground was calculated using a clinometer. The breeding period of Black-headed Ibis is generally associated with the monsoon season,

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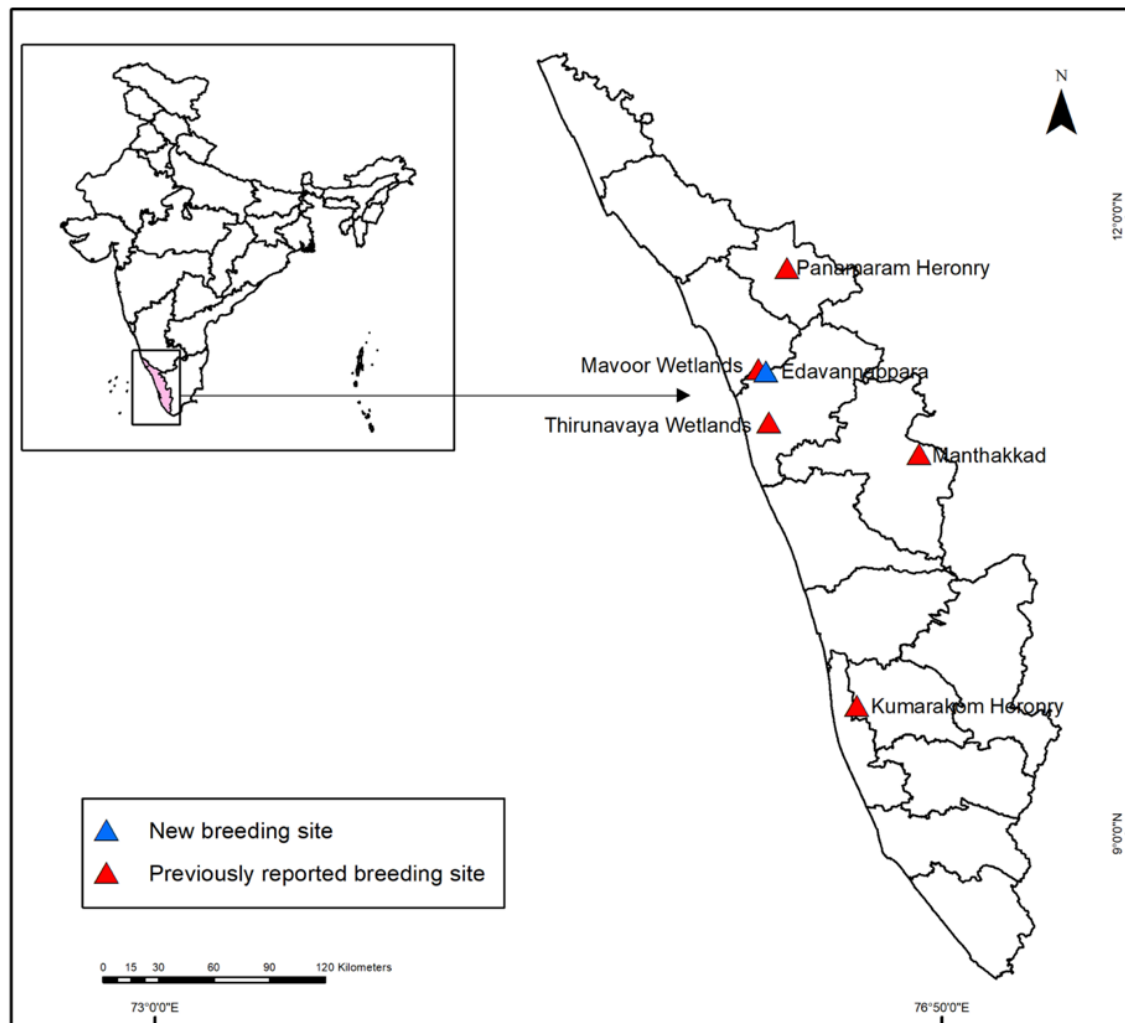


Figure 1. Breeding sites of Black-headed Ibis in Kerala (Created using ArcMap10.8).

although late breeders may extend the nesting period until April (Chullakattil 2022).

The tree is positioned along a busy roadside, subject to frequent human movement, vehicular traffic, infrastructure development, private construction, and daily disturbances such as light and noise pollution. The tree serves as breeding and roosting site for several birds such as Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Cormorant *Microcarbo niger*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, and House Crow *Corvus splendens*. Surrounding landscapes comprised of shallow water pools, paddy fields, and agricultural lands. During the present study, the Black-headed Ibis was frequently observed visiting the nearby agricultural fields for feeding, indicating that these habitats provide suitable foraging grounds for the species (Image 2).

Previous studies have reported variation in nest

height across Kerala. At Kumarakom wetlands, Kottayam District, the mean height of nesting trees was  $2.59 \pm 0.66$  m (Narayanan et al. 2006), while nests in Panamaram, Wayanad District, were located at a mean height of  $7 \pm 0.45$  m (Balakrishnan & Thomas 2004). In Palakkad District, the recorded nest height was around 5 m (Roshnath et al. 2017), while in Thiruvananthapuram Zoo it was 6 m (Bindya et al. 2019). The report from Kozhikode District did not document precise nest heights (Shifa 2021; Chullakattil 2022). Observations from Thirunavaya wetlands indicate an average nest height of  $3.18 \pm 0.49$  m (Chullakattil 2022). The newly discovered nests were located on the branches of *Alstonia scholaris* around 14.4 m, significantly greater height than those reported in earlier studies. The species can successfully exploit agricultural lands (Sundar 2006), attributing to population increase in Kerala. Breeding colony indicate the presence of suitable habitat conditions such as



Image 1. Nests of Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*. © K.K. Junaina.



Image 2. Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* foraging in the nearby agroecosystem. © K.K. Junaina.

adequate food availability, secure nesting grounds, and surrounding wetland health.

With the continued degradation and loss of natural wetlands, agroecosystems are increasingly emerging as important alternative foraging and breeding habitats for wetland birds (Czech & Parsons 2002). The management of bird-preferred tree species, and conservation of habitats and existing trees in and around agricultural landscapes and adjacent wetlands, can enhance the availability of suitable roosting and nesting sites, thereby supporting population conservation (Byju et al. 2025). Moreover, long-term and systematic monitoring is essential to evaluate breeding success, colony persistence, and the sustained suitability of these modified habitats.

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