Birds in the Backyard

The **Grey-backed Shrike** (*Lanius tephronotus*) (upper left), **White-spotted Fantail** (*Rhipidura albogularis*) (lower left), **Black Drongo** (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) (centre), and **Rufous Treepie** (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*), while morphologically quite different, belong to the same superorder— Corvoidea— that also includes crows, orioles, minivets, and the paradise flycatcher. Species usually colonise islands from the mainland. However, the core Corvoidea (>700 species today) seems to have originated and diversified in islands of the proto-Papuan archipelago almost 40 million years ago and subsequently radiated out to Southeast Asia and other continents. Many species in the core Corvoidea are associated with large, hooked bills for omnivory, feeding flexibility, innovative behaviour, and complex social structure.

The grey-backed shrike is locally common in the Himalayas and the hills of NE India and in the plains near these areas. It has a black band across the forehead and eyes and a grey back. It is a solitary hunter of small vertebrates and insects. The white-spotted fantail is found in the secondary forests of peninsular India and can be identified by its white eyebrow, white spots on the breast, and a long tail that is fanned out while moving. It hunts insects during aerial sallies and by gleaning them from the vegetation. The black drongo and rufous treepie are found almost throughout India. The former has a diagnostic white spot at the base of the bill and a forked tail. It is often seen sallying in the air or swooping to the ground to catch insects, and aggressively mobbing aerial predators. The rufous treepie is a large, omnivorous bird, feeding on fruits, invertebrates, lizards, and birds' eggs in trees.

Photos by Dhruba J Saikia, T N C Vidya (Drongo)