

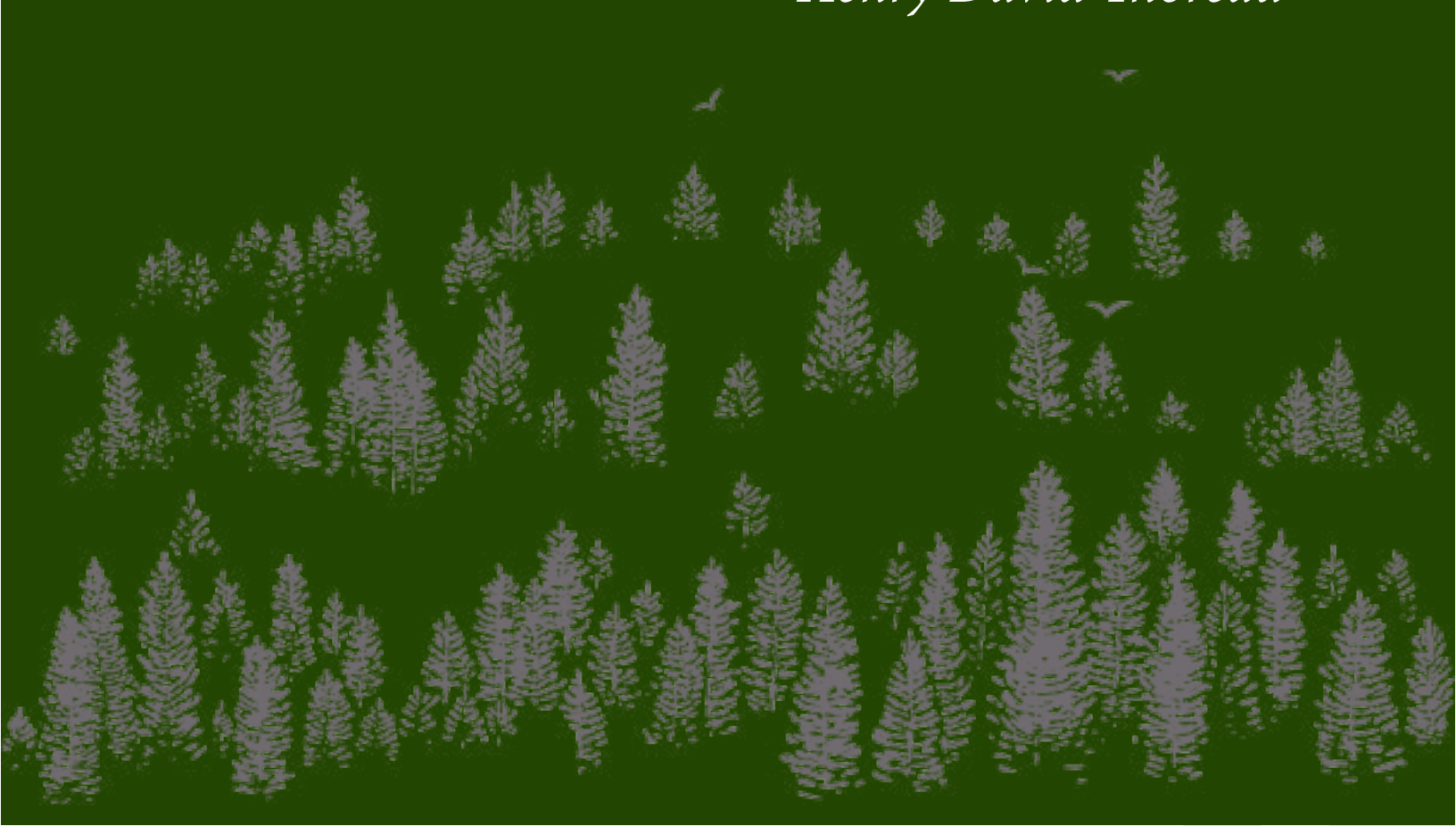
NEWSLETTER

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“Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth.”

- Henry David Thoreau



Fantail is a newsletter published by Birdwatchers' Society. This newsletter's primary aim is collecting and disseminating learnings, experiences and anecdotes contributed by citizens through their observations from the field. While the emphasis is on the avian world, equally important are the observations of the habitat and environment of the avifauna including conservation, biodiversity and acknowledge citizen scientists of the region.

Front Cover Illustration:
Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher
Priyam Chattopadhyay

Back Cover Photo: Black Baza
Debapratim Saha

Cover Design, Layout
& Graphics:
INTAGLIO
info@eintaglio.co.in

Publisher:
Birdwatchers' Society
Address: DB 75, Salt Lake,
Kolkata 700064, INDIA

Email:
birdwatcherssocietywb@gmail.com

Website:
<https://birdwatcherssociety.org>

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EDITORIAL

Hello Birders,

We hope 2022 kicked off well for you folks!

By the time this newsletter reaches you, hopefully, providence would have seen us through another cycle of pain and pandemonium. Our heart goes out in grief & gratitude to all those who have suffered bitter losses during this period. We also take this opportunity and salute our frontline friends who have caringly weathered a tough time during this crisis.

As before, we seem to have emerged victorious & better experienced in handling such an onslaught. The editorial team too has had its consequential impact, which has briefly delayed our publication. Nevertheless, here is your much awaited issue.

Within this gloom & doom, THANKS to the fraternity, Fantail Issue#2 was received well. This time around, we did receive an increased number of comments and feedback, better than Issue#1 for sure. We saw a significant increase in viewership across the world too. Fifteen hundred readers viewed the newsletter from 20

countries and almost all major cities of India—remarkable! A huge round of appreciation to the contributors (authors, illustrators, and painters) and a big hug to the editorial team.

Birds have influenced every individual on this planet. As a source of fascination, birds have influenced music, paintings, architecture, aviation, temples, movies, etc.—almost every sphere of human activity and amusement. From prehistoric-period cave paintings to metals & stone figurines in the Indus civilization, onto the evidence of birds and animals in literature during the Mauryan period (2 BC). In ancient Indian art and also world art (Roman, Egyptian, etc.), birds and animals have a sacred seat. Birds have thus been depicted on temple structures and in paintings, dramas, epics, religious texts, etc., and continue to amaze us with their antics, beauty, rituals, and songs. In this issue we bring to you snippets of avian influences in art apart from our regular features.

With **'Avian Art'** as the theme for Fantail Issue#3, we have the pleasure to present Dr. Asis Kumar Chatterjee—a multifaceted personality: gynecologist, traveler, trekker, blogger, photographer, birdwatcher, and author— who has shared his research on "Birds in Temple decoration."

Dr. Sukanya Datta, who was the Chief Scientist at CSIR, writes about the evidence of avian representation in various art forms since the stone age and through various civilizations. Madhulika Liddle, a prolific writer and a classic cinema critique, has permitted us to present her reminiscence of "Bird Songs in Hindi cinema." Mona Dash from London shared her poems inspired by birds.

We also have birders Abhishek & Priyam, both BWS members, presenting their creative artistry. Finally, rounding up the theme, we have a short documentation of avian musical influences curated from the internet. Not to forget Supriyo Ghatak, birder and our in-house artist, who continues to present his interpretations through avian cartoons.

For every birder, the binocular is the basic and most important tool. Often, we land up in a mess while trying to choose one. In this issue, Arijit Banerjee, a forester, with profound knowledge of lenses and light has penned a handy guide on choosing the right binocular. It is an article that will be of help forever, as birders are often confronted to choose from a plethora of options.

Are you taking the first steps in birding? Souvik Roychoudhury presents how he mastered the game through neighborhood birding.

With depleting habitats around us, "Conservation" finds a special mention covering grasslands and wetlands by Prateek, Santanab, and Diprovo. Sibananda, a banker, writes about his observation of the Indian Paradise Flycatcher's breeding lifecycle. Keeping with our tradition of encouraging young birders & authors, we are delighted to publish Risa's report on her birding trip to the 'Scotland of India'.

Also, Dibyendu and Rozan conclude their 2-Part series of the 10-day bird watching trek in Khangchendzonga National Park in this issue—an exciting and informative travelogue. BSW Member Nizar Virani writes about his imagination of sighting a pelagic bird coming true. All this comes along with our usual features of puzzles and crosswords.

Birding has been in full swing this season and likewise, Birdwatchers' Society has had a busy season. Apart from regular birding activities, BWS held its first annual camp in Purulia in December 2021—Major Parihar has meticulously documented this activity. Pampa Mistri shares the update on a Bird Walk organized by BWS in collaboration with Disappearing Dialogues NGO for children of East Kolkata Wetland.

We wish to publish a corrigendum for a mistake made in our last issue. We missed mentioning the credits for two images in the article 'Bio-diversity of Tajpur' written by Priyam Chattopadhyay (Issue#2 Page 44).

- The Olive-backed Pipit © Rounak Patra
- The Golden Jackal image © Pampa Mistri

We hope you enjoy this issue and do inspire others to join the fraternity. Most importantly, please continue to share your feedback by writing to us. It is worth a mention that we are gradually seeing an increase in articles and responses. This is a healthy sign and we hope you continue to support us in our mission.

Wishing you all 'Happy & responsible birding'. Look forward to your updates, stories, and hearing about your avian adventures.

Cheers!

Editorial Desk

Birdwatchers' Society

Email—birdwatcherssocietywb@gmail.com



AVIAN ART: A BIRDER'S ILLUSTRATION

Abhishek Das

Indian Paradise Flycatcher

Known as "Finte Bulbul" in Bengali, this was that wonder bird which opened my eyes to the beautiful world of avifauna, when I first saw an elegant male flying into the bushes during dusk in the forests of BR Hills, Karnataka.

Full Image at Page 38

Crested Kingfisher

The largest of the kingfishers from the subcontinent, I have always chased after this one during each of my visits to the Himalayas and am yet to see one perched on a rock surrounded by a turbulent river. Nevertheless, it was quicker to imagine one on pen and paper.



Full Image at Page 43

Coal Tit

Though on an office trip to Shimla, no one could stop me from visiting Hatu Peak during the weekends. Surrounded by flocks of birds early in the morning, including this beauty and the rarer white-throated tits, was a Sunday well spent.



Full Image at Page 70

Little Forktail

This bird was a fantastic sighting on the streams at Bidyang, North Bengal. The smallest of the forketails, its movement through the blue waters are a joy to watch anytime.



Full Image at Page 43

Pheasant-tailed Jacana

Probably the least boring (read "exciting") thing to do during the monsoons in Kolkata, is to watch the parent Jacanas bring up the little ones in one of the marshes (the only ones left) in Rajarhat. The colors convinced me to try acrylic after a long time and break the monotony of the black dot pen (and rains).



Full Image at Page 70

Abhishek is an IT professional, who's heart lies in the forests and mountains. Hailing from Howrah, got hooked into wildlife photography since graduate years, mostly in photographing birds. Loves to travel and illustrate during leisure time.



BIRDS IN THE DECORATION OF TEMPLES IN WEST BENGAL

Dr. Asis Kumar Chatterjee

Birds in temple decoration : Introduction

Decorations in temples are done for a variety of reasons; there is no doubt the foremost is the beautification of the temple, but other subtle reasons are there too. The most important of these are propagation of information.

What sort of information?

The answer is, information regarding religious matters like stories from the epics (The Ramayana and the Mahabharata); religious texts like KRISHNALEELA, DASHAVATAR, MANGAL KAVYAS etc.; folklore as well as recent social events. The last of these mentioned involves professions and professionals too.

So, there is a lot of messages in temple decorations, so much so that temple decoration can be compared to an encyclopedia ready to be read by the on-lookers.

In the present article, one particular aspect of the temple decoration in the temples of west Bengal is discussed, viz. BIRDS IN BENGAL TEMPLE DECORATION.

The site of decorations in a temple -

Though decorations are seen in almost every part of temples including the sanctum, we are here concerned with decorations which are found on the exterior walls of a temple.

The medium of Bengal temple decoration

Before delving into the main subject, let us discuss a little about the medium of Bengal temple decoration.

- * The decorations of temples of West Bengal basically fall into 3 groups : Picture (Mural/ fresco), idols and Bas-relief, of which the third one is the most prevalent.
- * Bas-relief again can be of 4 types : Terracotta, Stucco, Stone-works and Wood carvings. Of these, the lion's share goes to Terracotta.
- * Terracotta can again be of 2 types : Plaque and Cut-brick, of which the former, i.e. plaques are the most prevalent one.
- * So, to make the matter simple, it can be said that temple decorations in Bengal temples belong mostly to one particular type - the terracotta plaque.
- * This is fully applicable for the decorations of birds too.

Birds in Bengal temple decorations : Types

These can be divided into the following 6 groups :

- A. Birds as the mounts (Vahana) of different gods and goddesses (Pics 1 - 18)
- B. As part of the epics or religious texts (Pics 19 - 27).
- C. As part of folklore (Pics 28 - 35).
- D. As pets (Pic 36)
- E. As imaginary animals (Pics 37 - 40).
- F. As common birds drawn for beautification (Pics 41 - 44).

Now, let us discuss these one by one.

A. Birds as the mount (Vahana) of different gods and goddesses.

These include :

1. The Swan of Goddess Saraswati.
2. The Swan of Lord Bramha.
3. The Peacock of Lord Kartikeya.
4. The Owl of Goddess Lakshmi.
5. The Crow of Lord Shanideva etc.

Incidentally, Garuda, the Vahana of Lord Narayana can also be included in this group, though Garuda is not depicted as a bird, but rather as half-man half-bird.

Now, let us discuss these serially.

1. The Swan of Goddess Saraswati :

Goddess Saraswati along with her Vahana swan can be seen in many temples of West Bengal, mostly in terracotta plaque.

An important point to be noted is that Goddess Saraswati is depicted in two forms - as a part of Durga panel (where Goddess Durga is depicted with her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartikeya) or alone.

Some important examples are :

- i) Gopinath temple of Dashghara of Hooghly district.



Pic -1



Pic - 2

Pic -1 - Saraswati;
Gopinath temple; Dashghara

Pic - 2 - Saraswati;
Nandadulaljiu temple; Gurap

- ii) Nandadulaljiu temple of Gurap, Hooghly district.
- iii) Charbangla temple of Baronagar, Murshidabad district.
It is to be noted that in the Charbangla temple, we can see Goddess Saraswati with her swan both in terracotta plaque as well as in stucco decoration.
- iv) In the Saraswati temple of Ambalgram, East Bardhaman district, a beautiful Saraswati image is depicted in wood carving.

* In the religious texts it is sometimes seen that Goddess Saraswati is depicted with a peacock named "Chitramekhla" as her vahana instead of a swan, but in the present series of temples not a single image of Goddess Saraswati with peacock as her vahana is found.

So, this is a negative finding.

2. The Swan of Lord Bramha :

Lord Brahma with his swan can be seen in large number of temples.

Examples :

- i) Charbangla and Gangeswar temple of Baronagar, Murshidabad district.



**Pic 3 - Bramha;
Gangeswar temple; Baronagar**



**Pic 4 - Bramha on His Swan;
Charbangla temple, Baronagar**

- ii) Pancharatna Shiva temple of Itanda village and a Shiva temple of Uchkaran village of Birbhum district.



**Pic 5 - Bramha;
Shiva temple; Uchkaran**

- iii) Several temples of Bankura district like Shyamray temple of Bishnupur, Sridhar temple of Sonamukhi, Damodar temple of Hadal-Narayanpur, Girigovardhan temple of Kotulpur etc.



**Pic 6 - Bramha in stucco;
Girigovardhan temple; Kotulpur**

* It is to be noted that the last temple mentioned, i.e. Girigovardhan temple of Kotulpur has an image of Lord Bramha with his swan in stucco.

3. Lord Kartikeya with his vahana peacock :

A large number of temples in West Bengal have images of Lord Kartikeya riding a peacock, the name of which is "Paravani" as mentioned in the texts.

An important point to be noted is that Lord Kartikeya is depicted in two forms - as a part of Durga panel (where Goddess Durga is depicted with her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartikeya) or alone.

Some examples are :

- i) Durga temple of Bali-Dewangunj and Ananta Basudeva temple of Bansberia, Hooghly district.
- ii) Navaratna Shiva temple of Panchthupi, Murshidabad district.
- iii) Damodar temple of Hadal-Narayanpur and Sridhar temple of Sonamukhi, Bankura district.



**Pic 7 - Kartik;
Sonamukhi Sridhar**

- iv) Several temples of Birbhum district like Shiva temple of Supur, Shiva temple of Surul, Shiva temple of Nanoor, Nalateswari temple of Nalhati, Pancharatna Shiva temple of Itanda, Jorbangla Hadkata Kali temple of Itanda etc.



**Pic 8 - Kartik;
Shiva temple, Nanur**



**Pic 9 - Kartik;
Kali Temple, Itanda**



**Pic 10 - Kartikeya;
Nalateswari temple; Nalhati**

- v) Shiva temple of Bankaati, Paschim Bardhaman district.
vi) A temple in Ukhra, Paschim Bardhaman district where Lord Kartikeya is depicted as a Bengali "babu" wearing Bengali style Dhoti-Punjabi (Kurta).
vii) Nandeswar temple of Sahachak, Malancha, Kharagpur, West Medinipur district.

* The last two temples mentioned bear the images of Lord Kartikeya in stucco.



**Pic 11 - Kartikeya in the dress
of a Bengali Babu; Ukhra**



**Pic 12 - Kartikeya,
Nandeswar temple, Sahachak**

4. Goddess Lakshmi and her owl :

The name of the owl of Goddess Lakshmi is Uluk.

An important point to be noted is that Goddess Lakshmi, like Goddess Saraswati and Lord Kartikeya, is depicted in two forms - as a part of Durga panel (where Goddess Durga is depicted with her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartikeya) or alone.

Many temples have Goddess Lakshmi in their wall decorations, mostly as a part of Durga panel, but there are examples where Goddess Lakshmi is depicted alone.

Examples of the later are :

- i) Nandadulaljiu temple of Gurap, Hooghly district.
- ii) Gopinath temple of Dashghara, Hooghly district.



Pic 13 - Lakshmi,
Nandadulaljiu temple, Gurap



Pic 14 - Laksmi,
Gopinath temple; Dasghara

5. Lord Narayana and his vahana Garuda:



Pic 15 - Greater Adjutant Stork or Garuda bird

Garuda is depicted in religious texts mostly as half-man half-bird (head of an Eagle with the body of a man), but rarely he is depicted as a bird.

But in the decorations in Bengal temples Garuda is always depicted in the half-man half-bird form.

Incidentally, it should be mentioned that the endangered bird Greater Adjutant Stork (*Leptoptilos dubius*) is called Garuda bird and

considered by lay people as the descendants of Garuda of the mythological fame.

Lord Narayana riding Garuda is known as Khagendra Narayana (meaning “Narayana the King of Birds”) and is depicted in this form in many temples of West Bengal, some notable example being :

- i) Gangeswar temple of Baronagar, Murshidabad district.



**Pic 16 - Vishnu on Gadura;
Gangeswar temple, Baronagar**

- ii) Some temples of Birbhum district like Radha Vinod temple of Joydev-Kenduli, Shiva temple of Uchkaran, Jorbangla Hadkata Kali temple of Itanda etc.



**Pic 17 - Khagendra Narayana;
Shiva temple, Uchkaran**

- iii) Some temples of Hooghly district like Ananta Basudeva temple of Bansberia, Shiva temple of Silpara, Rajbalhat (this is an example of a stucco image).



**Pic 18 - Vishnu & Goddess Lakshmi on the back of Garuda;
Stucco work, Rajbalhat**

- iv) Shiva temple of Sribati, Purva Bardhaman district.
- v) Shiva temple of Bankati village, Paschim Bardhaman district.
- vi) Some temples of Bankura district like Damodar temple of Hadal-Narayanpur and Girigovardhan temple of Kotulpur (this is again an example of stucco work).



**Pic 19 - Vishnu in stucco;
Girigovardhan temple; Kotulpur**

6. Lord Shanideva with his crow :

In the present series, not a single example of Lord Shanideva with his crow is found. This is a negative finding, but in any analytic article, a negative finding is as important as a positive finding, so I'm mentioning this here.

B. Birds in Bengal temple decoration : as part of stories from epics and religious texts :

The two epics (The Ramayana and the Mahabharata) and different religious texts (especially Krishnaleela) are very important topics in the decorations of Bengal temples. Almost all temples bear these pictorial depictions in their wall-decorations.

1. Bird in the stories of the Ramayana :

Two stories from the Ramayana are depicted in a large number of temples :

- i) Ravana-Suparsha episode;
- ii) Ravana's flying chariot (Puspak Vimana) being drawn by a fleet of swans/geese.

i) Ravana-Suparsha episode :

While Ravana was absconding with Sita in his flying chariot, Suparsha, the nephew of Jatayu, the King of Birds, attacked Ravana to collect him as a food for his ailing father Sampati (Suparsha did not know that Ravana was forcibly abducting Sita). But clever Ravana sweet-talked Suparsha not to take him as food and escaped.



**Pic 20 - Ravan-Suparsha;
Gangeswar temple, Baronagar**



**Pic 21 - Ravan-Suparsha;
RadhaVinod temple; Joydev**



**Pic 22 - Suparsha with Ravana;
Charbangla temple, Baronagar**

This story is depicted in several temples where Suparsha, a huge bird, is seen trying to devour Ravana along with his chariot.

This scene is seen in temples like Radha Vinod temple of Joydev-Kenduli, Jorbangla Hadkata Kali temple of Itanda (both in Birbhum district); Gangeswar temple and Charbangla temple of Baronagar, Murshidanbad district; Gopinath temple of Dashghara, Hooghly district etc.

- ii) Fleet of geese/swan carrying the flying chariot of Ravana (Puspak Vimana) :
This scene can be seen in many temples like Shyamray temple of Bishnupur, Bankura district; Jora Deul (Twin temple) of Baidyapur, Purva Bardhaman district; a temple in Hadal-Narayanpur, Bankura district; a temple in Joypur, Bankura district etc.



**Pic 23 - Puspak Viman drawn by geese;
Shyamrai temple, Bishnupur**

- iii) Beside the above two, in the Gangeswar temple of Baronagar, district Murshidabad a terracotta plaque can be seen which depicts the scene where lord Rama was being greeted by Guha (or Guhak), the king of the Chandals (a lowly caste whose profession was cremating the corpse). In this scene, we can see a number of vultures perching on a tree below which Guhak is sitting.



**Pic 24 - Ram with Guhak Chandal;
Gangeswar temple; Baronagar**

2. Stories from Krishnaleela :

Krishnaleela (the events of the life of Lord Krishna) is a very popular subject in Bengal temple decorations. Almost all temples bear the stories of Krishnaleela in their wall decorations. Of the various stories about Lord Krishna, the story of Bakasura-Badh (Slaying of Bakasura the demon) has a bird in it.



Pic 25 - Bakasur badh; Anandabhairavi temple, Pic 26 - Bakasur Badh; Shiva temple, Itanda



Pic 27 - Bakasura badh; Charbangla temple,



Pic 28 - Bakasur Badh; Gopinath temple, Dasghara Sukharia Baronagar

This story is depicted in many temples, some notable examples being Ananda Bhairabi temple of Sukharia, Ramachandra temple of Guptipara and Gopinath temple of Dashghara (all in the Hooghly district); Pancharatna Shiva temple of Itanda and Shiva temple of Surul (both in Birbhum district); two temples of Joypur and Radheshyam temple of Bishnupur (all in Bankura district); Charbangla temple of Baronagar of Murshidabad district etc.

C. Birds in temple decorations : as part of folklore :

Birds are common characters in many stories of the folklore. The temple decorations include many of these. Some examples are given below.

1. A peacock with a snake in its beak :

This motif is seen in many temples, mostly in the angular plaques at the top corners of the front facade.

Here the peacock represents the Paragyan (The Ultimate Knowledge, i.e. the Knowledge about Param Brahma) and the snake Moha (life's base or lower attractions).

The significance of this motif is probably when Paragyan destroys the Moha, only then one can attain Moksha or Liberation.



Pic 29 - A peacock eating a snake; Lakshmi-Janardan temple; Debipur

Some of the temples bearing this motif are :

Charbangla and Gangeswar temples of Baronagar, Murshidabad district; Ananta Basudeva temple of Bansberia, Hooghly district; Lakshi Janrdan temple of Debipur, Purva Bardhaman district etc.

2. A snake devouring a bird (Peacock/swan?) :

This motif can be seen in the wall decoration of Nandadulaljiu temple of Gurap, district Hooghly.

But what does this picture signify?

It is difficult to guess. It may be a simple picture without any deep philosophical significance, or on the other hand it may signify Moha devouring up the Paragyan or Atma.



**Pic 30 - a snake eating a bird;
Nandadulaljiu temple; Gurap**

3. Byangama- Byangami :

These are a pair of birds mentioned in many stories of folklore of Bengal. They together may represent our conscience.

In a large number of temples we can see depictions of a pair of birds which are most probably these two characters.



**Pic 31 - Byangama-Byangamin;
Supur**



**Pic 32 - Byangama-Byangami in terracotta;
Shiva temple; Sribati**

4. Miscellaneous:

i) Hansalata

Hansalata means a vine or chain of swans/geese.

In many temples we can see this decoration.

Some notable examples are :

Navaratna Shiva temple of Panchthupi, District Murshidabad; Raghaveswar temple of Dignagar, district Nadia; Rajrajeswar temple of Dwarhatta, district Hooghly; Shiva temple of Bankati, Paschim Bardhaman etc.



**Pic 33 - Hangsalataa;
Navaratna Shiva temple; Panchthupi**



**Pic 34 - Hansalata;
Raghaveswar temple, Dignagar**

- ii) An interesting scene can be seen in Rajrajeswar temple of Dwarhatta, district Hooghly, where it is depicted that a crocodile is devouring a bird (swan?). The significance of this unusual scene is difficult to guess. There is only one example of this kind of picture in the present series.



**Pic 35 - A crocodile devouring a swan;
Rajrajeswar temple, Dwarhatta**

D. Birds in temple decoration : as general picture

In many temples we see birds like swan, parrot, peacock, owl etc. for general beautification.

E. Birds in temple decoration : as pets

In some temples we can see the picture of a lady with a bird, mostly a peacock.

Two notable examples are Girigovardhan temple of Kotulpur, Bankura district (it is a stucco work) and Ramachandra temple of Guptipara, district Hooghly (terracotta work).

F. Birds in temple decoration : as imaginary animal/bird

Some of the examples are :

1. Rock (or Rok) bird :

This is mentioned in the Arabian Tales. This powerful bird can fly with elephant/s caught in its talons and can devour elephants.



**Pic 36 - Lady with a peacock;
Ramchandra temple; Guptipara**

In Shyamrai and Jorbangla temples of Bishnupur, district Bankura, a huge bird is depicted which is flying with elephants caught in its powerful talons.
Is it a Rock/Rok bird of the Arabian atales, or is it a "Singha Pakshi" mentioned in the Ramayana?



**Pic 37 - Imaginary bird carrying elephants in talons;
Jorbangla temple, Vishnupur**

2. Kinnar :

This mythological figure is often depicted as half-man half-bird (upper part human, lower part bird).

This can be seen in some temples like Radha Vinod temple of Joydev-Kenduli, Birbhum district.

3. Garuda :

Garuda, the mount of Lord Narayana is already discussed.

4. Griffon :

Griffon (or Griffin) is an imaginary animal in Greek mythology. Its head and front legs are those of an eagle, the hind portion of the body is of a lion.

In some temples of South India, a similar composite animal called Viala or Yali is depicted in temple decorations. Viala is usually the composite of a lion and an elephant.

In Shyamray temple of Bishnupur we can see a peculiar animal whose head is of an elephant, ears are of a horse, wings of a bird and the rest of the body is of a lion. In one picture it is flying with 6 and in another 7 elephants. Some experts consider these two as a variant of Viala or Griffon.

Definitely it is highly intriguing and requires mention.



**Pic 38 - Griffon;
Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur**



**Pic 39 - Griffon;
Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur**



**Pic 40 - Imaginary bird;
Shyamrai temple, Bishnupur**

5. Bherunda :

This double-headed eagle is a form of Lord Narasingha (4th Avatar of Lord Narayana). In many temples in South India this imaginary bird is depicted.

However, in the present series, I've not found a single example of Bherunda.

This is again a negative finding.

Birds in Bengal temple decorations : Discussion

A. Temples involved in this article :

1. This article is written analyzing pictures collected from about 103 temples of different districts of West Bengal.

2. District-wise distribution of these 103 temples :

- i) Birbhum = 51
- ii) Bankura = 14
- iii) Bardhaman (Purva+Paschim) = 21
- iv) Hooghly = 07
- v) Murshidabad = 06
- vi) Nadia = 02
- vii) Medinipur = 02

B. Types of birds seen :

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| i) Parrot (32.1%) | vi) Vulture (0.8%) |
| ii) Peacock (23.1%) | vii) Suparsha (4.1%) |
| iii) Swan (15.2%) | viii) Garuda (8.2%) |
| iv) Egret (9.2%) | ix) Rok bird/ Singha Pakshi (1.6%) |
| v) Owl (2.5%) | x) Griffon/Viala/Yali (1.6%) |
| | xi) Kinnar (1.6%) |

C. Birds in temple decoration : most common birds depicted and why?

It is clear from above data that the 4 most frequently found birds in this series are parrot, peacock, swan and egret.

Now, the big question is why?

Do these 4 birds have any special significance, or is this merely a chance finding?

To find a reasonable answer to this question, we must first see what significance do these birds have in our religion or folklore.

Let us discuss one by one.

1. Swan :

- * It is seen that the swan occupies a special position in the Hinduism.
- * Rigveda mentions that the swan has the ability to separate Soma from its mixture with water.
- * Swan is regarded as the symbol of Atma or Paramatma. The flight of a swan symbolizes the Mokshalabha or liberation of a soul.
- * Swan is also regarded as an Avatar of Lord Narayana in Krita Yuga.
- * Swan is the mount or Vahana of Lord Bramha and Goddess Saraswati.

So, it is clear that the swan holds a special place in Hinduism.

2. Peacock :

- * The peacock is an important and sacred bird in Hinduism.
- * It is the symbol of Paragyan, or the Ultimate Knowledge.
- * The peacock is also regarded as a symbol of Love, Bliss, Peace and Beauty.
- * It is the mount of Lord Kartikeya, and also of Goddess Saraswati and Lord Ganesha (Moreswar Ganesha).

So, again it is evident that the peacock is also an important bird in Hinduism.



**Pic 41 - Peacock in stucco;
Damodar temple; Hadal-Narayanpur**

3. Parrot :

- * The parrot is the mount of Lord Kamadeva.
- * It symbolizes Beauty, Happyness and True Self.
- * The Byangama-Byangami (which are a type of parrot) of the folklore are actually our conscience.

4. Egret :

- * The egret symbolizes Beauty, perseverance and concentration.
- * In the famous fable of Bawk- Yudhisthira from the Mahabharata the Bawk (egret bird) played the vital role of a teacher who teaches Yudhisthira the deep philosophical facts of life.



**Pic 42 - A bird feeding its chick;
Shiva temple, Bankati**



**Pic 43 - Birds in Wood-work;
Stucco work; Baidyapur**



44 - Birds;Gopinath temple, Dashghara

From the above discussion, we can come to 2 conclusions :

1. These 4 birds are important in Hindu religion and culture.
2. The presence of these 4 birds in greater numbers in temple decorations are quite logical. They deserve their places.

D. Birds in temple decorations : why common birds are absent in temple decorations?

- * It is seen that common birds found in Bengal like crow, myna, sparrow, cuckoo, doel, kingfisher etc. are not found in temple decorations. The important question is why so?
I've not seen anyone ever raise this question. But definitely this is a pertinent question.
- * I don't know the answer, though I've a conjecture.
It may be that the answer to this question lies in all/some of/one particular point/s discussed below :
 - i) They don't have religious importance (though the crow is the mount or Vahana of Shanideva, but who is not afraid of Shanideva?)
 - ii) Technical problem :
It is comparatively very difficult to depict smaller birds in terracotta plaques.
 - iii) "Familiarity breeds contempt".

Conclusion

Birds in temple decoration is definitely an interesting subject.

The present series deals with only 103 temples, so it is a Pilot study at the best.

I sincerely hope someday somebody will work on a much larger series, so that more relevant facts come out.

Appendix

Here is a list of some of the important temples (with their year of construction) used in this study :

Temple	Town/Village	District	Year of construction
1. Ananta Vasudev	Bansberia	Hooghly	1679 AD
2. Bhavaniswar	Baronagar	Murshidabad	1755 AD
3. Bhairabnath deul	Ilambazar	Birbhum	1846 AD
4. Brindavanchandra	Guptipara	Hooghly	1810 AD
5. Charbangla	Baronagar	Murshidabad	1760 AD
6. Chaitanyadev	Guptipara	Hooghly	16th century
7. Dubrajpur temples	Dubrajpur	Birbhum	19th century
8. Ganpur Shiva	Ganpur	Birbhum	18-19th century
9. Gopalji	Kalna	Barddhaman (E)	1766 AD
10. Gangeswar	Baronagar	Murshidabad	1753 AD
11. Gokulchand	Gokulnagar	Bankura	17th century
12. Gopinath	Dasghara	Hooghly	1729 AD
13. Hanseswari	Bansberia	Hooghly	1799-1814 AD
14. HNpur different	Hadai Narayanpur	Bankura	19th century
15. Jorbangla Kestorai	Vishnupur	Bankura	1655 AD
16. Joypur temples	Joypur	Bankura	19th century
17. Jora Deul	Baidyapur	Barddhaman (E)	1560 AD
18. Kali Jorbangla;	Itanda	Birbhum	19th century
19. Krishnachandraji	Kalna	Barddhaman (E)	1752 AD
20. Krishnachandra	Guptipara	Hooghly	1745 AD
21. Lakshmi-Janardan	Ghurisa	Birbhum	1739 AD

22. Lakshmi-Janardan	Surul	Birbhum	19th century
23. Lakshmi-Janardan	Ilambazar	Birbhum	1846 AD
24. Lakshmi-Janardan	Debipur	Barddhaman (E)	1836 AD
25. Lalji	Kalna	Barddhaman (E)	1739 AD
26. Lalji	Vishnupur	Bankura	1658 AD
27. Madanmohan	Vishnupur	Bankura	1695 AD
28. Mahaprabhu	Ilambazar	Birbhum	19th century
29. Nanur temples	Nanur	Birbhum	17-18th century
30. Pratapeswar	Kalna	Barddhaman (E)	1849 AD
31. Radha Vinod	Joydev-Kenduli	Birbhum	1683 AD
32. Raghunath	Ghurisa	Birbhum	1633 AD
33. Rajrajeswar	Dwarhatta	Hooghly	1728 AD
34. Rajbalhat Shiva	Rajbalhat	Hooghly	18th century
35. Ramchandra	Guptipara	Hooghly	Late 18th century
36. Rameswar	Ilambazar	Birbhum	Early 19th century
37. Rasmancha	Vishnupur	Bankura	1600 AD
38. Rasmancha 18-chura	Hadal Narayanpur	Bankura	1854 AD
39. Radha-Damodar Baro	Hadal Narayanpur	Bankura	1806 AD
40. Radhagovinda	Jagadanandapur	Barddhaman (E)	1839 AD
41. Radhashyam	Vishnupur	Bankura	1758 AD
42. Raghaveswar	Dignagar	Nadia	1669 AD
43. Ratneswar	Bhattabati	Murshidabad	Early 18th century
44. Shyamrai	Vishnupur	Bankura	1643 AD
45. Shiva Pancharatna	Itanda	Birbhum	1828 AD
46. Shiva Rekhdeul	Itanda	Birbhum	1815 AD.
47. Shiva jora mandir	Supur	Birbhum	19th century
48. Shiva Sribati	Sribati	Barddhaman (E)	19th century
49. Sribati Chandreswar	Sribati	Barddhaman (E)	1802 AD
50. Sridhar	Sonamukhi	Bankura	1845 AD
51. Sridhar	Kotulpur	Bankura	1833 AD
52. Uchkaran Shiva	Uchkaran	Birbhum	1768 AD

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Dr Asis Chatterjee, a Gynaecologist, a world traveller, high altitude trekker, blogger, photographer, bird watcher, a passionate writer has authored many books and blogs (100 English, 200 Bengali). An e-book on Bengal temple decorations amongst his other works. He is an accomplished photographer with international publications.

BIRD PUZZLE: GUESS ME



Answer: Page 57



BIRDSONG? NO, REALLY. BIRD SONGS

Madhulika Liddle

I sometimes spend time at Delhi's Okhla Barrage Bird Sanctuary. The barrage on the Yamuna hosts a vast number of migratory birds through the winter. There's plenty of bird life that attracts me to this sanctuary:



The sight of all those lovely birds reminded me of all the great 'bird songs' we have in Hindi cinema – a motif, oddly enough, that's endured into relatively recent times, what with the (to me, excruciating) Kabootar jaa jaa and Chhat pe kaala kauwa baitha. Birds have always been very much a part of Hindi film songs. With lovers being likened to parakeets and mynahs, or a pair of swans; or a pining lover being assigned the role of a chukar partridge yearning for the moon (not something I have ever heard of a bird doing). Or, more commonly, pigeons and crows and kites and whatnot.

So. Inspired by all these birds, I've come up with my list of ten songs that feature birds, or names of birds. They're all pre-70s songs (though, admittedly, birds were alive and kicking



through the 70s too: remember Jhooth bole kauwa kaate? Remember Ekdaal par tota bole? Or Tota-mynah ki kahaani toh puraani?). They're all from films I've watched, and they're all species-specific. No generic panchhis here. (Though, to be fair, there are some awesome songs on those too: Chaludjaa re panchhi, Jaa re jaa re udjaa re panchhi, Panchhi banoon udti phiroon mast gagan mein, etc. Another post).

And to make it more difficult for myself, I decided this had to be ten different birds. No repeats.

Here goes.

1. Suno sajna papihe ne (Aaye Din Bahaar Ke, 1966):



While the papiha (the hawk cuckoo, better known as the brain-fever bird) got labelled a gossipy tittle-tattle in Fariyaad, this song assigns the bird a kinder role – as the harbinger of spring. Interestingly, it is believed that the papiha's call is actually 'pee kahaan' – Hindi for 'where is my love?', good enough reason for lyricists to want to feature it in love songs. I love this song; Lata sings it very well, it has beautiful music (and bird call-like notes too!); and the picturisation includes two of my favourite people.



2. Jangal mein mor naacha (Madhumati, 1958):

Those of you who've been following my blog for a while will probably know how much I love this song. It's brilliantly picturised, the music's awesome (as if Rafi's voice, tripping along in that drunken but perfectly in surway) and Johnny Walker is at his absolute best. It is also delightful evidence of the fact that a peacock, dancing, can draw people's attention off just anything possible.





3. O meri mynah tu maan le mera kehna (Pyaar Kiye Jaa, 1966):

What a peppy, cute song – from Mehmood and Mumtaz's dancing to Manna Dey's and Usha Mangeshkar's rollicking singing. And it celebrates the feistiest of India's more ubiquitous birds. (I'm assuming it's the common mynah Rajinder Krishan was referring to when he wrote this song). Mynahs have oodles of character – you can see it in those sharp-eyed little faces, and in the nonchalance with which they peck on the fringes of roads, just inches from speeding trucks. I'd say it's quite a compliment to be called a mynah by one's beloved. Just one niggle: why the cross-species romance? I have never seen a mynah and a parakeet (or a pigeon) billing and cooing together.

4. Cheel cheel chillaa ke kajri sunaaye (Half Ticket, 1962):

Also one of the most amusing train songs there is, this one's a fabulous little tableau of life in a train carriage: the lovers cooing among themselves; the lalaji whose paunch is ample evidence of a life lived well; the crook being carted off by the police; and the madcap passenger who will entertain everyone. A completely whacky Kishore Kumar is accompanied and assisted by a handful of merry children and a dholak wallah as uninhibited as Kishore Kumar himself. Little detail: the dholak wallah, in this song where "jhoom-jhoom kauwabhi dholak bajaaye" ("the crow plays the dholak merrily") has a face as angular and sharp as a crow's!

Oh, and a record four species of birds is mentioned in this song: the black kite (cheel), crow (kauwa), parakeet (tota) and mynah. Since the cheel is the most prominent in the lyrics, that's the species I'm going to 'allot' this song to.



5. Ek tha gul aur ek thi bulbul (Jab Jab Phool Khile, 1965):

Though both Kismet (1943) and its remake Boyfriend (1961) had a song each in which the loved one was likened to a bulbul, this is the quintessential bulbul song – it's about a bulbul that makes the fatal mistake of falling in love with a flower. And I thought cross-species romances were a bad idea; this would be doomed from the word go. But the essence of the song seems to be that if one loves another, that love should be as lasting and true as that of the bulbul's and the flower's.

Whatever; the music's good, the scenery's awesome, and Rafi is at his best. And there really aren't too many songs out there that are stories about birds.



6. Kuchh din pehle ek taal mein (Laajwanti, 1958):

A comparatively little-known Nargis/Balraj Sahni film, but with great music—including this song, which is yet another story featuring birds. It is also the story of our tragic heroine, who chooses to recount the sorrow of her life to a group of cute little kids, who all end up weeping as a result of the story. I don't care for the unhappiness here, but the music, and Asha Bhonsle's rendition of the song, are wonderful.



Coincidentally (or are swans such everlasting symbols of fidelity in Indian tradition?), Do hanson ka joda from Ganga-Jamuna is also about a pair of swans that is separated by fate.

7. Kaahe koyal shor machaaye re (Aag, 1948):



Nargis again, but a younger, more girlish Nargis, singing now in the voice of Shamshad Begum. She's on a stage, surrounded by silent lookers-on, men operating the lights and watching her critically, but her angst at the noisy koel—whose call serves to remind her of her lost love—looks very real indeed. A short song, and there's something rather gawkish about Nargis (and I must admit to not liking Aag at all), but the song is good.

8. Bhor hote kaaga (Chirag, 1969):



Another song-on-a-stage, and (a first in this list!) the bird in question actually spends a good bit of time onscreen. It is a stuffed crow, from what I can tell—its 'flying' is definitely artificial, and the aplomb with which Asha Parekh sweeps it off the wall couldn't have been possible with a live, sharp-beaked crow. But there's a hint here of the crow's legendary canniness: our heroine believes this crow to have the ability to tell her who will come visiting her village!

9. Chalat musaafir mohliya re (Teesri Kasam, 1966):



Someone commented on another of my lists the other day, saying that it's unreasonable for me to confine my lists to songs from films that I've seen, because films are often hard to get hold of, and songs can be appreciated in isolation too. True. But sometimes you can appreciate the song more fully if you know the context. This wonderful folksy Manna Dey song, for instance, is (on the surface) about a cage-bound munia that manages (how?) to savour the best of life, by alighting at the shops of a sweet-seller, a paan-seller and a cloth-seller. But if you look behind the words, there's also the bitter-sweet reference to the beautiful Heerabai, the dancing girl who is caught in the cage of her own profession. She too wants to have it all, but will she? Will her cage not keep her bound?

10. Murge ne jhooth bola (Manmauji, 1962):

I don't suppose any self-respecting bird watcher would put a rooster on his or her list of birds spotted, but anyway: a rooster too is a bird, so it qualifies for this list. Like Cheel-cheel chillaaake, this song too features more than one bird: there's a crow and a sparrow (referred to as a 'chidiya', though a sparrow is, strictly speaking, a gauraiyya). And both the rooster and the sparrow are wicked birds: one's a liar and the other's a thief.



The kiddie version of the song, with live birds instead of models, is worth a look too.

Do you have any favourite bird songs? And do you know of any other songs featuring birds of species other than the ones I've listed? (I can think of two, but both from films I haven't seen: Chaand ko kya maaloom chahta hai use koi chakor from Laal Bangla, and Teetarke do aage teetar from Mera Naam Joker). Oh, and there's Kabootar, kabootar from Dillagi—a film I've seen and rather like, but a song I find irritating.

Madhulika Liddle is an Indian writer who writes in English. She is best known for her books featuring the 17th century Mughal detective Muzaffar Jang, although she is also a prolific writer of short fiction, travel writing, and writing related to classic cinema.

BIRDS THROUGH THE MIRROR OF TIME

Dr Sukanya Datta

Perhaps appreciation of the nurturing instinct of birds guided the hands of Stone-Age artist using a flintstone on limestone to carve the likeness of a mother Crane with its chick. There seems to be empathy at play because along with two birds she also carved the likeness of two human-beings. Were these depictions of herself and her partner on a hunting trip juxtaposed against the avian mom and chick? Darkness enveloped the piece of limestone for 12,000 years till researchers from the University of Barcelona discovered it from the Hort de la Bequera archaeological site in Spain in 2011.

This piece of limestone with avian and human petroglyph is rare; even unique. It is definitely an incipient story a tale just beginning to unfold. No one can be sure if it is evidence of a hunting trip and the birds are prey or, if it has cultural significance we have not yet understood. Very few other European Paleolithic sites except those in France and Germany have similar carvings where birds and humans share space.

Interestingly enough this sort of human empathy for birds resonates deeply in India.

The Ramayana springs into being with the shloka, "Ma Nishadayat krouncha mithunadekam sokam avadhim kama mohitam." The words flowed spontaneously from the mouth of Valmiki when he saw a hunter kill one of a pair of courting cranes (likely Sarus cranes). Empathy is truly a human trait! It is remarkable that birds happen to be central to both these ancient

examples of human empathy. The first is from the Stone Age; the second from India, one of the world's most-ancient civilizations.

Ancient civilizations have all celebrated avifauna in art. Be it in poetry or in stories or as sculpted images, paintings or mosaics, birds have always been central to ancient-art. In India many divine manifestations are associated with birds. The Goddess Lakshmi, for example, is associated with owls. This may be because owls prey on rodents that are grain-eating pests. The Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) was also associated with Goddess Athena-the Greek Goddess of Wisdom. Goddess Saraswati-the Indian Goddess of Learning rides a white swan. The swan is the form Zeus the ancient Olympian God took to seduce Leda the wife of the King of Sparta. Helen (of Troy) was one of the twins born of this union. Leda's legend was frequently represented in Greek and Roman art.

Recently, excavation of the ruins of Pompeii that was destroyed when Mount Vesuvius erupted (A.D. 79) has revealed a stunningly sensual fresco depicting this legend. Its claim to being exceptional is that it shows Leda boldly looking at whoever enters the bedroom on the walls of which the fresco was painted.

Stories that reveal the close connection of birds, myths and legends are present in all countries. Every civilization has its avian quota of stories told and retold over generations.

Mesopotamia is perhaps the earliest of all the civilizations on Earth. Seven fragments of what was once a large piece of limestone stele carved to celebrate the victory of Lagash over Umma (dated 2600–2350 BC) have been found. Vultures can be seen holding the severed heads of fallen Umma soldiers in their beaks. Isn't it still blood-curdling to mentally go back to the battleground that no longer exists and allow imagination to show us the vultures circling above and descending to feast on the dead and dying? Let us fast forward to the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer's unforgettable shot entitled *The Vulture and the Little Girl* (1993). It features an emaciated Sudanese child struggling to reach a UN Feeding Centre as a Hooded Vulture waits near her... as if waiting for the child to die. Many have questioned why the photographer chose to immortalize the scene instead of actively wading into it and re-writing the child's fate. Others have conjectured if the shot traumatized the photographer so much that he committed suicide barely a few months after clicking it. Empathy, is truly a deeply human trait as is our habit of documenting history as it happens.

Sometimes birds play a role.

Nowhere is it more eloquent than on the panels of the tomb of the Egyptian Prince Nefermaat (2600 BCE) and his wife, Itet. The Royal Power-couple had an elaborately decorated eternal resting place. The walls were covered with beautiful paintings. One painting, entitled *Meidum Geese*, showed three species of geese. This artwork is so exquisite that it is called Egypt's Mona Lisa. Two species of geese were readily identified. The first was most likely the Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) or perhaps the Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis*). The second was the Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*). However, the third species only superficially

resembled the Red-breasted Goose (*Branta ruficollis*). No one can categorically say if this bird is a now-extinct species of goose; a natural aberration or a figment of the artist's imagination. However, many now-extinct animals such as antelope, gazelle oryx, and Auroch have been definitely identified in Egyptian art. So why should the speckled goose in the Meidum painting not represent a currently-extinct goose species that was part of the biodiversity of yore?

Although interpretation of the Meidum Goose painting in the context of biology remains a conjecture yet, a recent finding in China has rewritten a bit of archaeology quite decisively. Yet again, a bird is at the heart of this find.

It happened when researchers sifted through a rubbish pile excavated in Lingjing (China). They discovered a tiny bird figurine barely 2 cm long. It had been hand-carved from a bit of burnt and intentionally blackened bone. Researchers think it shows a perching bird belonging to the Family Passeriformes. This find, which has been called "absolutely original artistic tradition", is at least 13,500 years old. It is also the only known sculpture of a Palaeolithic-bird standing on a pedestal. It pushed back the history of East-Asian animal sculpture by eight millennia. Scientists who presented the research paper on the Lingjing Bird said that, "The figurine differs technologically and stylistically from other specimens found in Western Europe and Siberia, and it could be the missing link tracing the origin of Chinese statuary back to the Palaeolithic period." Archaeologists say that this sculpture is markedly distinct from the artistic styles of Europe and Siberia.

From Europe comes its own exciting archaeological find. The modern humans that took up residence in Swabian Jura (Germany) when humans first arrived in

Europe during the last Ice Age left behind carved figurines as well as musical instruments made of vulture-bones. The carved figurines include a waterfowl made of ivory which was excavated in the Hohle Fels cave. The sculpture is just 47 mm long. This avian figurine has been dated to between 31,000 and 33,000 years of age; making it one of the earliest depictions of a bird. It is thought to be, most likely, a duck, or a diver or a cormorant.

Fascinatingly enough, Europe has revealed an ancient and hidden avian connection that is making us re-evaluate ancient trading routes! The clue to this was hidden in plain sight in the famous painting Madonna della Vittoria (1496) by the Italian Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna. The painting is on display at the Louvre (France). Dr Heather Dalton, Historian at the University of Melbourne first noticed a Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*) in the painting. From the relaxed stance of the avian model it was clear that the artist was painting a living subject. This is unusual because live

Cockatoos were unknown in Europe at that time although parrots that mimicked human speech were held in high regard. It is now being thought that this bird could have been transported via the Silk Route (from Australia or Indonesia via China) along with other precious and luxury items.

Well, all these discoveries linking our human heritage to birds are precious indeed; but what if we could, get a glimpse of the gem-studded Peacock Throne that is now lost to Time. And if visiting long lost bird-decorated thrones were possible, who would not wish to see the Throne of Solomon...decorated as it was with each six steps. Each step had a pair of animals, sculpted in gold. The fourth and sixth steps bore birds. The fourth boasted of an eagle opposite a peacock while the sixth housed a hawk opposite a pigeon.

Wouldn't that be a priceless experience tying facts, legends, birds, vanished royalty and common present-day citizens in an infinite loop?

Dr Sukanya Datta was Chief Scientist with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. She has over two decades of experience in the field of science communication. She is one of the few women science fiction writers of India with four published collections and another on the way. She has also written many popular science books.

Indian Paradise Flycatcher



Abhishek Das



THE AVIAN ARIA

Amitava Dutta

[Aria: An aria is a solo song for a singer in an opera]

In the world of performing arts ... Avian opera could perhaps be a spellbound performance with profound impact. So while covering Avian Art as the theme of this Newsletter, I felt compelled to explore the musical creativity of the Avian world. Spending hours surfing the internet, and thereafter with the help of my editorial colleague Ms Pampa Mistri, I have tried to present a brief compilation of the influences and interpretations of Bird song (Avian Aria)!

The North American mockingbird is famous for its ability to imitate the song of other birds. But it doesn't just mimic its akin species, it actually composes its own songs based on other birds' melodies. An interdisciplinary research team has now worked out how exactly the mockingbird constructs its imitations. The scientists determined that the bird follows similar musical rules as those found in human music, from Beethoven to Messiaen.

Talking about the Avian performers, for the trained ear, the Koel tends to sing in raga Shankarabaranam. The Malabar whistling thrush, a versatile singer, sings very complicated phrases and is heard singing in Malhar, Mohanam and Bilahari. The Orange-headed ground thrush can be heard singing in Kalyani. Indian robins are heard singing to 'kanda chapu thaalam' the 5 beat cycle in Carnatic (where carna means 'ear' and ataka means 'pleasing', i.e. 'ear-pleasing') music, it can be thought of as the 5/8 time signature in Western Music, says AJ Mithra, the first Indian Zoo musicologist.

There is a belief that the seven 'swaras' in Hindustani Music were conceived from the sounds of nature. The seven swaras as we all know are- Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni. These 'swaras' represented by:

Shadaja (Sa) - the rapturous sound of the peacock when rain clouds gather in the sky.

Rishabha (Re) - the bellowing of a cow when her calf is separated from her.

Gandhara (Ga) - the bleating of a goat in a flock.



Whistling Musician

Madhyama (Ma) - the cry of a heron.

Panchama (Pa) - the sound of the Indian Kokila (nightingale) in spring.

Dhaivata (Dha) - the neighing of a horse.

Nishada (Ni) - the trumpeting of an elephant.

In the swaras, Sa, Ma and Pa are sounds made by birds whereas Re, Ga, Dha and Ni are sounds made by animals.

The sounds of nature finds its expression in the music of our daily lives. The desire to imitate nature may also explain a mystery in the Indian subcontinent regarding certain incomprehensible mantras used in a very, very old, and not often performed Hindu ritual.

The syntax of obscure Hindu Vedic chants whose origin is lost in time isn't like any known human language, but matches the patterns of two bird species. There is a whole body of unintelligible mantras in the Agnicayana ritual (a fire-based Vedic rite in honour of the God of Fire, Agni and involves building an altar shaped like a bird over 12 days) that nobody can make out. Though written in language, they have no known linguistic meaning. Dr. Frits Staal, emeritus professor of philosophy and South Asian Studies at University of California Berkeley, examined the first of these strange songs, the 'Jaiminiya Gramageyagana'. First it was determined that its syntax patterns could not be matched to any known language anywhere. Then, inspired by a hunch – he sought the mantra syntax in local birdsong. The structure of the Vedic patterns were found to mimic two migratory birds known to be present in the area: Blyth's reed warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*) and the Common whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*). It could be that the mantras, simply a nice melody, were the sounds of nature that were used in a ritual to connect man to the divine.

Composers from Vivaldi to Mozart have been inspired by bird songs. In the Middle-ages and Renaissance, birdsongs were used most often for symbolic reasons: nightingale songs might represent faithfulness and purity, as a cuckoo song might imply deception. In the Baroque and Classical eras, animal imitations were



A versatile singer

often used as a source of humour, while romantic composers used animal sounds to evoke the idea of the pastoral. Hindustani classical music has often used birds as a metaphor in their compositions. Koels, Cuckoo, Peacock find references as sounds that heighten the female protagonist's desire to be united with her lover who is in a distant land, far removed from home. Even the Crow has been used as a messenger carrying tidings between lovers.

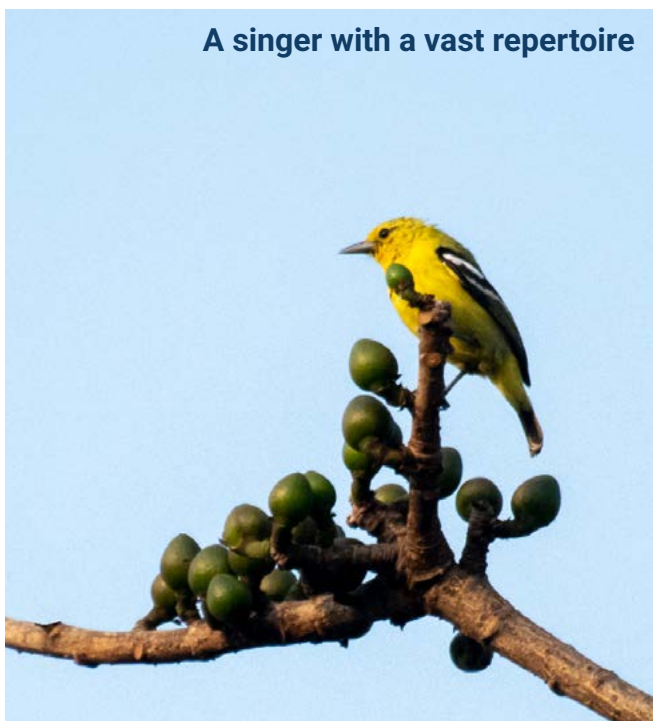
Mithra who has observed and experimented with bird songs extensively says “The syncopation of bird songs has intricate patterns and most of them are new to humans. They sing very short phrases compared to human singing, but their syncopation has complicated but complete rhythmic patterns”. For birds, it is a matter of survival. “If a male bird did not know how to sing, he would surely end up staying a bachelor all his life. Without a mate, there would be no reproduction, and without reproduction, the world would end up in chaos.” Says A J Mithra, accredited as the only Indian Zoomusicologist. Mithra conducted experiments of recording birdsongs and composing music(<https://soundcloud.com/ajmithra>). His work caught the attention of musicians and researchers, among them the award-winning Australian violinist and composer Hollis Taylor. After hearing Mithra’s music, she nicknamed him the ‘Bird DJ’, and announced the arrival of India’s first zoomusicologist to the world of music. Prior to his passing in March 2014, Mithra taught music at the MCC Campus Matriculation School, in Chennai, India. Through his pioneering work in studying birdsong, throughout his life, he remained a passionate naturalist and an inspiring educator.

Birds vocalize throughout the year. While males sing to call attention to themselves, their perch is also an important dimension of performance. It is observed that birds like Sunbirds, Oriental magpie robins and Koels that sing on higher frequencies choose the highest perch. Birds like Stonechat, Treepie and Common-iora that sing on slightly lower frequency choose the mid-range of the trees. And birds like Mynahs, Crows and Babblers that sing on the lower frequencies choose anywhere below the midrange. Many birds engage in duet calls. In some cases, the duets are so perfectly timed as to appear almost as one call. Such duetting is noted in a wide range of families including Quails, Bushshrikes, Babblers such as the Scimitar babblers, some Owls and Parrots.

Quite recently (Dec 2021) an album made up entirely of the tweets and squawks of endangered Australian birds has debuted in the top five of the country’s Aria music charts. Songs of Disappearance surpassed the likes of Abba and The Weekend - not to mention Christmas favourites Michael Bublé and Mariah Carey. Created by BirdLife Australia, the album features the birdsongs of 53 of Australia’s most threatened species. When it was released on 3 December, Songs of Disappearance made history by becoming the first album of its kind to chart in the top five. Avian Opera!

Author Bob Sundstrom, writing about just how similar is birdsong in terms of structure to the music we humans create, highlights two recent studies that offer contrasting answers. Each assessed, statistically, the songs of a superb avian singer to see if they followed the kind of harmonic structures that we would

A singer with a vast repertoire



recognize in human music. One analysis used nearly 250 song examples of the Nightingale Wren, a tropical American bird widely admired for its haunting song. [Nightingale Wren song, <http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/195293>, 0.05-.09]. The research found no consistent similarity between the structure of Nightingale Wren's song and that of western musical scales. But a parallel piece of research reached a very different conclusion. Hermit Thrush song, (<http://macaulaylibrary.org/audio/169025>, 0.15-20). Analysis of slowed-down Hermit Thrush songs revealed that they had a harmonic structure that was similar to human music at least 70% of the time.

These dissimilar results leave open the question of whether birds and humans share a biological predisposition toward particular musical structures. Though the beauty of a bird's song is something that may always elude scientific explanation, it is quite evident that birds have an evolved sense of aesthetics and musical finesse. The interpretation of birdsongs and classifying them into various ragas or opera pieces is part of the musical evolution.

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Amitava is a freelance technology consultant. At times he cares to write. A travel enthusiast, Amitava, spends much of his time driving and exploring the wilderness of India.

Crested Kingfisher



Little Forktail



Abhishek Das

AVIAN INSPIRATION

Mona Dash

Nostalgia

Where did you go
You rainbow-winged bird of flight?
Seen when lost in slumber or
when sleep filled eyes awaken
in transient rays of the early sun.

Enraptured with memories,
Krishna- blue, Lakshmi-gold
dazzling one's eyes.

Just a flash of those wings,
just a whiff of an earthy smell
enough to coat days with dreams.

I used to see you nest
beyond those mango trees
where rainforests grow lush beyond
realms
where longing mates with dreams.

I look out of the window, waiting.
On the window sill,
a Murano vase stands
A green- yellow- purple,
colour medley frozen in its middle cold,
unmoving.

I arrange soft flowers
still looking out of the window.
looking out of my life
as the horizon drifts farther away,
and a flash of colour fades into greyness.
Where did you go
You rainbow-winged bird of flight?



A call

Is that your voice?
The one which calls out
when the night and morning meet
and form the molten love-child, dawn.

Is that your voice?
Sometimes bird,
sometimes human
at times a whisper, at times a shout.

It can only come from worlds across
over the hay- filled fields
the placid sheep from caves, caverns or
mountains or beyond.

It questions,
do you remember me?
It soothes, I will always be here.
Sometimes, it stands outside forgotten.

Mona Dash writes fiction and poetry. She was awarded a 'Poet of Excellence' award in the House of Lords in 2016. Mona leads a double life, apart from being a writer, she works full time in a global technology organisation. Originally from India, she lives in London.



THE SCOTLAND OF INDIA

Risa Biswas

This time, we went to Coorg. Nothing, exotic, nothing fancy, but just good old Coorg.

Who am I kidding? A tally of 20 lifers in a 14-day trip is simply amazing and I say that it is ordinary!

Well, we went directly after New Year's Day. It was a 6-hour long drive from Bangalore to a small town called Sidhapura in Madikeri. There, just outside the town, we stayed at a coffee estate at a homestay called The Annexure. I was super excited because Dad had said, "a cat and a dog were living there." But when I reached there...Oh boy! There were 2 dogs, and 3 cats not to forget a kitten too. The old tomcat's name was Marcos and then the other tomcat was Mini-Marcos, and the young male cat (who was my favourite) was Pangre (don't ask me the meaning!) and the kitten's name was Pinky. Whenever we weren't going here and there or not doing birding, trekking, and



whatnot, I played with the cats. We stayed there for 10 days. The first 5 days Dad and I had work in the office and the online school. In between my classes, I would find Pangre sitting outside our cottage, basking in the sun. I'd play with him for a few minutes and then head back to the screen. Every morning during that week we went birding around the area. We heard Brown Wood Owls' hoot in the mornings and evenings. We also saw the usual species like Indian Grey Hornbill, Southern Hill Mynah, Crimson-backed Sunbird, etc. Some days we'd get lucky and find an Indian Yellow Tit, a White-rumped Needletail, or a Nilgiri Flowerpecker.



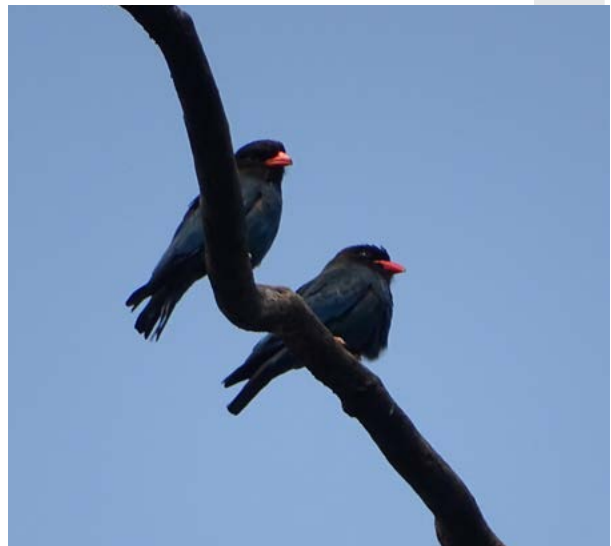
On the morning of the 7th, we went near the Kerala border and saw 5 Pied Hornbills and 2 Dollar Birds. Yes, you read this right, and no, you don't have to go to the optician again to check your eyes' optical power. Bopanna Uncle (He's an experienced birder in Coorg and knows this place like the back of his hand) was surprised and promised to

check out the area soon. On Saturday, 8th January, we got a chance to explore more. We went to a lake called Kirangur and the place was teeming with life! Minivets, Barn Swallows, River Terns, Woolly-necked storks, Black and Brahminy kites alike, were all there. Suddenly, Dad called out to me that there's a Grey-Fronted Green Pigeon, sitting on an open tree. I hurriedly ran up to him and I panted out, "Yes, what's up?" "There's a GFPG sitting on that tree, yes over there." Dad said excitedly. I observed the bird with my binoculars and camera and then sighed. "No Dad... It's a Yellow-footed Green Pigeon." "What are you saying...." Dad protested and then checked Ebird. After a few minutes he looked up from his phone and had a very sad look in them. "Well, don't worry we can see it again you know!" (We actually did but since I had to keep in the word limit, I couldn't write about that part). That evening we went to Chicklihole Dam where we only saw an Osprey. And later, we saw a couple of sunbirds, Barn and red-Rumped swallows, and a Blyth's Reed Warblers. Quite bland if I say so myself.

The next day, we went on a trek to Kabbe Hill and also saw the Chelavara waterfall. The waterfall was impressively grand and we saw a Heart-Spotted Woodpecker and Asian Fairy Bluebirds. At Kabbe, we started off beautifully with Oriental White Eyes, a very gracious Crimson-backed Sunbird who posed for us for a few minutes, and Mountain Imperial Pigeons calling to one another (which we later identified as the pigeons, at first we thought they were owls). Grandpa stayed down at the foot of the hill because the hill was too steep for him to climb. Of course, we chose the shorter hill because the chances of birds were higher there compared to the other one. So, we plodded along occasionally commenting about the great view and stopped only to



take pictures of a Mountain, Imperial Pigeon. I didn't go all the way to the top because it got very steep. Though while climbing up it shouldn't make a difference, the challenge was to come down. So, I stayed put a few meters below. I don't know what Mum and Dad saw or what they did. So, all I can say was that I sat down and took a small nap and tried to make a braid with dried grass (no, it doesn't work, they break after some time). I think I saw sparrows/buntings though I'm not at all sure about that. I waited for Mum and Dad for a full half an hour and it started getting hot with the sun beating down on my back. Thankfully, a few minutes later they walked down and then began the treacherous descent that I had dreaded for so long.





One hour later

"Huh, that wasn't so bad after all!" I told cheerfully to Dad with a grin and he just sighed.



On the 10th we birded with Bopanna Uncle. He took us to his property/estate first and showed us around. There were elephant footprints everywhere thus making the terrain hard to walk on. There were many streams, and gorges that we had to jump to cross. And no, none of us fell into one of them, though I will admit, it would be very exciting if we did, but we had experience and avoided the slippery mud. (Oh well! Mum and Dad had the experience, I just walked everywhere and slipped a hundred times).

What I will say is that later we went to a Brown Wood Owl hotspot with uncle and we played his recording. After 10 mins the other birds who were sitting in the canopy set up a whole racket. Uncle told us that they must have sensed the presence of the Owl and were alarming the other birds. Five minutes later, we saw the beautiful creature. Wow. It was so magnificent, elegant. After many pictures, we said good day and went back home.

The next day, we went to climb Mountain Thunderbolt. Just Kidding, we climbed Tadiandamol. Just so you know, it's the highest peak in Coorg and the third highest in Karnataka at the height of 1748m. We didn't see many birds apart from a Eurasian

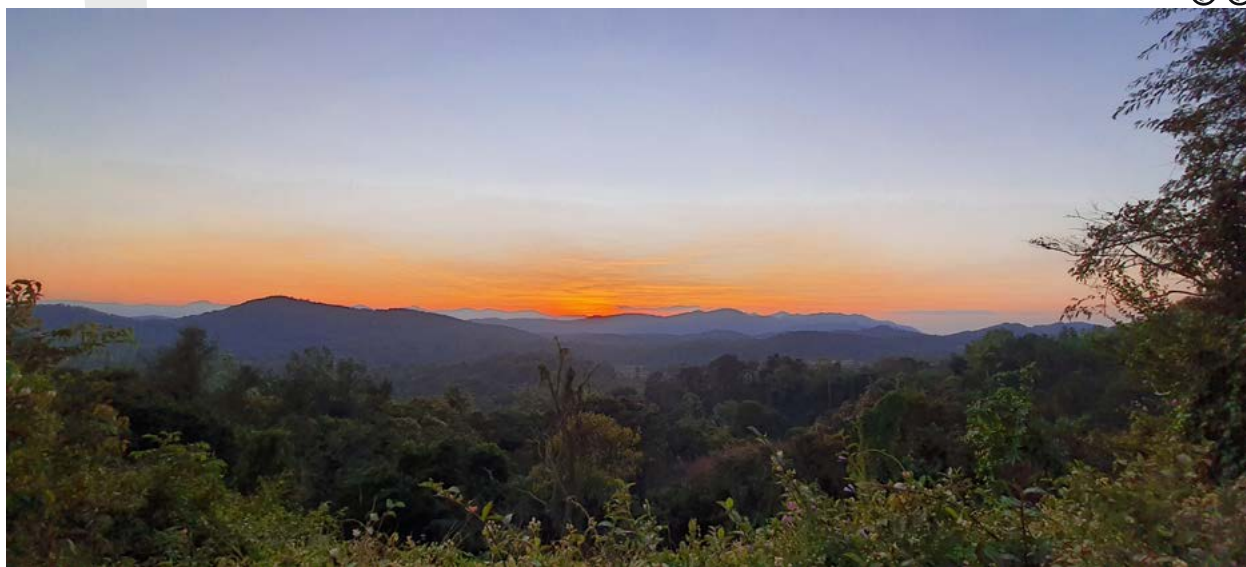




Kestrel, Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Black Eagle, and a bunch of martins, swallows, and swifts. We couldn't hike the actual hill, but we went to a neighboring one because the actual hill was way too high and it would take us at least another 2 hours to reach there so we paused mid-way. By the time we came back, we were covered with leeches. Well, Mum was, anyway, Dad and I didn't have any. She still has the marks to this very day, though it's healing well.

On the 12th we shifted to the outskirts of Madikeri and stayed in a place called the Magnolia Mist which was run by Mr. Abhishek (according to my observations made by overhearing my parents' conversations, he was famous and he helped many famous birders like Grimmett and Inskipp to bird in this region). The moment we entered the road and parked our car, a dozen of barks followed. I was the first one out, and I was terrified when I saw





3 dogs barking their lungs out. I took a deep breath and kept my calm. But to my very own astonishment, I quite liked the dogs. There were 3 dogs with 7 puppies!! The puppies were a month old and were simply adorable. The puppies, Zorro (My favorite dog) and Elsa (the mother of the puppies) were German Shepherds/Alsations. The last one, Pepper was a domesticated dog, but she too was very sweet. The cottage/house also had an attic where I was supposed to sleep. When nightfall arrived, it was colder than I expected and I was frozen stiff. That first night, was not pleasant. After that, I always took great care before I went anywhere. I was not in a mood to get a cold.

The next day, we went for yet another trek. We went to climb a hill called Nishani Betta and we started off with a marvelous sunrise. After taking plenty of pictures, we continued. After an hour of good hiking, we reached the top. And wow, the view was breathtaking. Dad took stunning pictures and was very proud of them. When we started descending the hill, I nearly slipped on a slippery near-vertical rock! Thank God I grabbed hold of Dad's arm and managed to save myself. Later in the afternoon, we went to the Harangi Backwaters, and we saw precisely 43 Small Pratincoles, all of

them resting on the bank of the lake. This particular one was super fat, and cuddly and stood a little away from the flock, "Almost as if he was kicked out because of being so fat and adorable," I commented. Then we went to see the Raja's Tomb and saw a couple of Long-tailed Shrikes. While we were returning, we came across a Rufous Babbler, calling its heart out, on an open wall. This positively drove my dad insane and he demanded for his camera from the back seat. I panicked and couldn't unstrap the camera. I got so frustrated, I tossed Dad my camera, saying that he could use that. Dad was on a verge of screaming at me but he just took it and attempted to take a picture. The picture



later turned out to be quite terrible. And all this time, the bird was patiently waiting on the wall. Finally, Dad got out of the car and I unstrapped the camera and gave it to him. He took a full video and many pictures.

We took a walk around the tea plantations the next morning, which was led by Zorro. Pepper and Zorro had broken the rules and had come down into the valley with us, but we shooed them back. They didn't re-appear. We were casually walking along when a big burly creature nosed his way between Dad's legs and rushed up to me. "Zorro! Oh, you bad dog, you got seeds all over your fur! I told you to go back! Oof, why did you come! Well, I guess you have to tag along." I scolded the dog. Zorro wagged his tail and his eyes were shining with excitement. Once we reached the valley again, Zorro jumped straight into a pond covering himself completely with mud and soil. "Zorro, No bad Zorro! Get out from the water, now!" I grumbled. Zorro obediently did not go near water after that.

On the last and final day, we went birding at the foot of Nishani Betta again, as we

saw traces of many birds around that area. Sure enough, within an hour, we came back to the homestay with a smile on our faces. We saw two White-bellied Treepies, a white-bellied flycatcher, and a dozen of Malabar Whistling thrushes. Although we did not get a chance to take any pictures, we were given a free ticket to witness a concert, of Malabar Whistling thrushes. Their songs were beautiful, each note unique. Truly, this was the icing on the cake.

P.S – This trip was awesome. I loved it. True, we missed out on a few of the lifers, but that's okay. We can always come back for more. This was also a very tiring trip as we hiked so much. Now I can even say that the treks in Hampi and North Bengal were puny compared to the treks in Coorg. This time, maybe the Whistling thrushes should receive the honor of being Best in Trip, because when they sang on the last day, I swear, it was just magical. Well, I guess that's all I have to say! I suppose I'll see you guys on our next trip in April.

Ciao!!



Risa is a young birder studying in Grade 7 at Ebenezer International School, Bangalore. She is an avid nature enthusiast and regularly joins her father for birding.



TEESTA GRASSLAND AS BIRD HABITAT

Prateek Choudhury

To a non-birder or a person without any interest in a nonhuman lifeform, the landscape may appear to be a barren land, without any life. But if you are a person interested in birds, and decide to explore the landscape, you should find the landscape teeming with life. The riverbed of Teesta, locally known as Teesta grassland, is one of the recreational destinations for the local people of Jalpaiguri that is now growing as a popular birdwatching destination in the birder community. It is a typical riverine landscape. The siltation of the river created some chars (sandbank or sandbar) on the vast riverbed. During monsoons, streams meander around the chars, but when it is dry season, they turn into an open sand bed with small natural water holes. The chars are covered with tall grasses. Mainly *Saccharum*, *Phragmites*, *Typha*, *Imperata*. On the well matured higher chars, tree species like *Ziziphus*, *Albizia*, *Bombax*, ferns, etc. start to grow. While it may look monotonous, there is diversity in the landscape.



Broadly the habitat can be divided into two niches. 1) stream bed, 2) higher chars/grassland. There are two categories of streams in the landscape. The mainstream that flows round the year and the seasonal streams that dry up during the dry season. Usually, waders occupy the habitat, but the species disappear one by one as the water level decreases gradually.

Waders like Common Greenshank can be seen till some waters remain in tiny (natural or people made for domestic cattle to drink) water holes. Wader like Common Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Little-ringed Plover can be seen as long as there is some moisture in the soil. When it turns into a dry and dusty sand bed, Sand Larks occupy the place. Such sand beds between two higher chars (especially if it is undisturbed) are also roosting places for Ruddy shelduck, Black Stork, raptors, etc. The mainstream and the tiny muddy chars are safe havens for the birds like Ruddy Shelduck, Great Cormorant, Northern Lapwing.



The higher chars can be categorized as Kash (*S. spontaneum*) grassland and mixed grassland. The pioneer species on this sandy soil is Kash. It grows scatteredly on sandy soil, gathers silt, and makes a larger char with vast tracts of thick Kash grasslands. As the char goes higher, the soil turns less sandy—the other species like *Phragmites*, *Typha*, *Imperata* grow and the char turns into a mixed grassland, sometimes with patches of short grasses. Sometimes other shrubs and herbs also join them. The well-matured chars have scattered *Ziziphus*, *Albizia* trees. Such tall grasses host birds like Zitting cisticola, Plain Prinia, Graceful Prinia, Paddyfield Warbler, Spotted Bush Warbler, Striated Babbler, Black-breasted Weaver and of course the star of the landscape—Golden-headed Cisticola. The meadows surrounded by tall thick grasses are safe roosting places for the birds like raptors, quails, pipits, larks, short-eared owls, etc.

There is also a niche spot that is neither full grassland nor an open sand bed. These are the first stages of the creation of vast grasslands. Those are scattered mounds of soil with the growth of tall Kash grass, on an open sand bed. Gradually they get submerged and turn into a larger undivided grassland. Such mounds act as perch for raptors like Common Kestrel, Long-legged Buzzard, Short-eared Owl. These mounds also act as a halting station for birds flying from one char to other across a vast sand bed. But besides these natural formations, human





interventions are gradually changing the landscape, because of agricultural expansion and human settlements in the chars. With the advent of humans and agriculture, tree plantations are taking shape in the grassland, consequently, birds that were quite uncommon (than the grassland dwellers) in that particular place, like Common Myna, House-crow, Oriental Magpie Robin, Black-hooded Oriole are seen in the middle of the chars.

With every passing day, the natural grassland of the Teesta riverbed is shrinking. If this natural grassland of Teesta disappears, not just Jalpaiguri, but India will lose one of the most important bird habitats on this planet.

Prateek is a field researcher with HEAL in Purulia, with special interest in grassland birds. He splits his time between Purulia and Jalpaiguri his home town.



GOLDEN-HEADED CISTICOLA

A GOLDEN BIRD FROM A GOLDEN GRASSLAND

Santanab Majumder

Jalpaiguri is one of the most important towns in the northern part of West Bengal. It is the divisional headquarter which has several important offices, educational institutes, and of course, the River Teesta. The mighty Teesta flows just beside the town, creating a beautiful landscape around the city. In October, when the sky is clear, Mt. Kanchenjunga can be seen easily over the vast "Kash-Bon" (colony made of *Saccharum spontaneum*). With the emerald green water of Teesta, this is indeed a sight to behold. Teesta has created a massive floodplain in the vicinity, which is a part of a long stretch that originates from Sevoke (where Teesta meets the plains) and continues up to Bangladesh. The bank of Teesta is an ideal place for various grass species. Apart from *Saccharum*, *Typha*, *Phragmites*, *Imperata*, and many other species grow in this vast landscape. And they have created a habitat for many birds, many many birds.

It was a sunny afternoon in December 2012. Some young birders gathered around the famous Jubilee park to click photos of a spotted owlet pair. And I was one among those young birders, enthusiastically clicking photos of a Chestnut-tailed Starling. Suddenly, Biswapriya (Babia) Da, (current president of BWS) arrived at the place and asked, 'তোরা কিসের ছবি তুলছিস?' (What are you clicking?). Pointing towards the vast field, he said, "explore the grassland, you may find many amazing species there". That was the beginning of the exploration, and the beginning of the name "Teesta Grassland".

Almost 10 years have passed. We have scanned the grassland every year in different seasons. Babia-da was 100% right. The grassland is full of birds (also mammals, reptiles, insects, but those will be told in a different storyline). To date, near about 220 species of birds have been documented (data from my checklist and e-bird data) from the area. Some of them are residents, some are migratory. Some of them are critically endangered, some vulnerable, some near threatened, and some of them are of least concern. The critically endangered Yellow Breasted Bunting was seen from the grassland, though in recent years we are missing these beautiful birds. However, the endangered Steppe Eagle can be seen each year in the winter along with the Indian Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle (Vulnerable). In this article, I will talk about a tiny resident breeder of the grassland, the beautiful Golden Headed Cisticola.

In India, there are two species of Cisticolas, Zitting and Bright or Golden Headed Cisticola. Golden-headed cisticola is a resident bird that has two subspecies, Erythrocephala, which can be found in the Western ghats, and Tytleri, which can be found in the North and Northeast. In our region, Tytleri Ssp can be seen.

In non-breeding plumage, this bird is very much similar to Zitting Cisticola in its appearance. The distinguishable feature is its call, "Song comprises one or two jolly doubled notes introduced by a buzzy wheeze (Grimmett et al, page 326)". In the field, it sounds like "Chaa-Chaa" which is different from the "Chirp" sound by Zitting. In non-breeding plumage and infemales, the supercilium looks rufous, which is different from Zitting, as Zitting has white supercilium. The tail is blacker than Zitting with narrow buffish or greyish tips. Unstreaked rufous nape and sides of the neck is another pointer by which these two species can be separated. The crown and mantle are heavily streaked. Another interesting point is the tail is longer in non-breeding plumage.



Non-breeding
Female and Male

Magical transformation can be observed in breeding male Tytleri. It has a creamy white crown and underparts, rufous-brown wash to nape, and the sides of the neck along with unstreaked olive-gray rump.



Breeding Male

In West Bengal, this bird can be seen along the Teesta floodplain, apart from Teesta grassland, Gajoldoba is another place where this bird can be observed. In Teesta grassland, it is one of the most predominant breeding species with a steady population. It breeds in the dense grassland that is mostly inaccessible, for its breeding season falls in the month of July-August when the water level is high. In August 2021, Rajdeep Mitra, Supriyo Ghatak, and I went to the submerged grassland by crossing the river with a boat. We have successfully documented the breeding behavior of the bird and were mesmerized by its transformation. It was quite an adventure.



Grassland at monsoon

During winter, when the water level falls, the grassland loses its greenery, and becomes golden, this bird can be heard but is less seen, as it prefers to hop amidst the thick foliage of the grassland. The color of the bird perfectly blends with its habitat and it becomes difficult to photograph them. However, in early morning, when the sun peeps out from the heavy mist and fills the grassland with its soft rays, Golden-headed Cisticolas come out. They prefer to enjoy the early sunlight. In that period of the day, they emerge from the grass

thicket and bask at the top of the tall grasses. The same thing happens with the dying sun as well. So early morning and late afternoon are the perfect time to observe this tiny bird.

Now, how to reach the Teesta grassland? In Jalpaiguri town, there is a famous place called Jubilee park that is situated near the banks of Teesta. From the riverbank, there are elongated extensions, which are locally called "Spar". The one, which is situated at Jubilee park, is referred to as 1 number spar and if we go south, along the riverbank, the number increases. From 1 number spar to 5 number spar, the grassland can be seen with the help of binoculars. In the past, the grassland used to start right from the spars. However, given the extensive cultivation going on nowadays, it is losing the battle. We have to move east from the spar, in the direction of the main river flow. After crossing the cultivation fields, the grasslands appear which are in fragments now. As they are in fragments, the density of the Golden-headed Cisticolas is high. Any grassy patch contains at least 5-10 birds. The vocal birds will welcome you with their "Chaa-Chaa" call.

As the human population increases, the economy has to thrive, and so does the agriculture. Right now, there is a balance in Teesta grassland between farmland and grassland. However, the size of the grassland is sinking day by day and we have to strive to maintain the balance. While, Teesta grassland hosts more than 200 species of birds, the Golden-headed Cisticola is one of the most iconic species amongst them. Although it is termed as a least concern species in India, it is a less studied bird that resides in the most neglected habitat-- the grassland. I hope that the grassland will survive and year after year, people can watch this golden bird amidst the golden grassland.





Santanab is currently pursuing his PhD in nano electronics from IIT Kharagpur. A biodiversity lover, with special interest in avian beauties.

Bird Puzzle Answer

- 1st row (left to right) : Green Bee-eater, Bulbul, Black Kite, Streak-throated woodpecker
- 2nd row (left to right) : Common Myna, Barbet, Crow, Treepie
- 3rd row (left to right) : Black Drongo, Green Pigeon, Hornbill, Woodpecker
- 4th row (left to right) : Ibis, Indian Robin, Kingfisher, Peacock
- 5th row (left to right) : Koel, Owlet, Parakeet, Sunbird
- 6th row (left to right) : Shikra, Sunbird, Racket-tailed Drongo



FULBARI: A DYING WETLAND

Diprovo Majumdar

If I ask, 'Name the one river that is flowing through the city of Siliguri?'. To this question more or less everyone will take a maximum 1 or 2 secs and answer the same.

Of course, we all know this - Mahananda river. Now if I ask to name the wetland that river Mahananda and Siliguri is nourishing, here so many people will fail. Although the name would sound familiar to most people - 'Fulbari Wetland'. Now, my final question is, what is the importance of this wetland in our city's and adjoining place's eco-system?



Here I'm pretty sure that 90% of the people will fail.

That's why I call it a 'Dying Wetland'. Day after day, the condition of Fulbari wetland is getting worse due to people's lack of awareness and attention.

Over the last five years, I have been watching the birdlife and their habitats in this area and I would say Fulbari is a very good example of habitation for water birds, grassland birds, paddyfield birds as well as marshland birds. Primarily this wetland can be considered as one of the last strongholds of the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting. This year also more than two hundred individuals of this bird have been recorded from here even in such poor condition.

Fulbari wetland is a perfect example where, from Near-threatened (NT) to Critically Endangered (CR) IUCN categorized birds are inhabiting. Like Red-necked Falcon (NT), Lesser-adjutant Stork (VU), Indian-spotted Eagle (VU), River Lapwing (NT) and the

movement of Himalayan Griffon Vulture (NT) has also been recorded around this place.

Apart from Yellow-breasted Bunting, there are three other Bunting species – Black-headed Bunting, Black-faced Bunting and Little Bunting present here.

Among the raptors, apart from Red-necked Falcon the Pied Harrier, Black-winged Kite, Marsh Harrier, Common Kestrel, Booted Eagle, Black-eared Kite, Osprey, Buzzards are quite commonly seen.

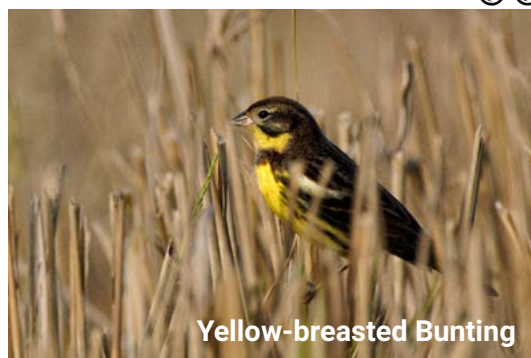
And if I talk about the water birds then the rare and threatened Falcated Duck migrates here every year. The barrage water body also holds healthy population of Ferruginous Pochard, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Shelduck etc.

This wetland is a permanent habitation of Purple Heron and Grey Heron, Red-naped Ibis. Just the previous year two individuals of threatened Black-headed Ibis, an Ibis of which North Bengal has got a small population have also been sighted.

Other commoners are Common Snipe, Asian Openbill, Bronze-winged Jacana, Black-winged Stint, Temminck's Stint, Sandpipers, Plovers, Small Pratincoles etc.

Along with all these, some of Bengal's most common village birds like - Green Beak Eater, Common Hoopoe, Pied Bushchat, White-Breasted Waterhen, Common Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, Common Hawk Cuckoo etc are permanent residents here.

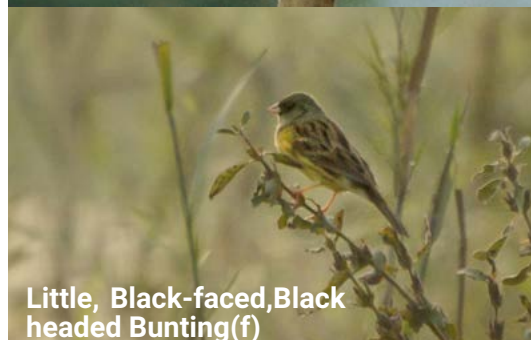
But, if you think that birds are the only factor to mention about Fulbari, then you are very much mistaken. This shrinking wetland also has some scattered distribution of mammals that are not commonly seen nowadays, like - Bengal Fox, Black-naped Hare, Mongoose etc along with other reptiles and amphibians.



Yellow-breasted Bunting



Red-necked Falcon



Little, Black-faced, Black-headed Bunting(f)



Pied Harrier flying over the grassland



Lesser-adjutant Stork

This sole existing wetland of Siliguri also supports the enrichment of the aquatic flora and fauna as well as many medicinal plants. In short this wetland is a perfect example of ecotone that supports a huge number of flora and fauna.



Northern Lapwings flying over the Grassland

Presently, in every corner of the globe one of the biggest and most common threat to the survival of animal kingdom is habitat loss. Fulbari is no exception. Unlike most other wetlands of West Bengal and India, poaching isn't that kind of issue here but the rapid destruction of habitat is. Nowadays, if we google any particular threatened species, the most common threat to it we will find is habitat destruction. In just last two years the amount of area this wetland has lost can't be believed without seeing it with naked eyes.

Growing population always leads to human encroachment. Grounds where just few years back free movement of Lapwings, Wagtails, Pipits were seen, have now become human settlements, and their practices are affecting the natural resources in many ways. Feral dogs are also a major problem nowadays for ground-nesting birds.

Apart from all these, a common scene here is non-biodegradable wastes are floating everywhere in the water. Surely people have forgotten what kind of support this river provides to the inhabitants of this city.

Actually what else can be expected, where 90% of the city's population don't even know that there exists such a unique wetland in their city, where people don't have any idea of the importance of this wetland in our ecosystem, where people are familiar with the name 'Fulbari' only because it's a river barrage area and connecting adjoining



Burning bushes



Sandpiper feeding with wastes

highways. Still some concerned people and organizations are working to protect the natural resources of this area.

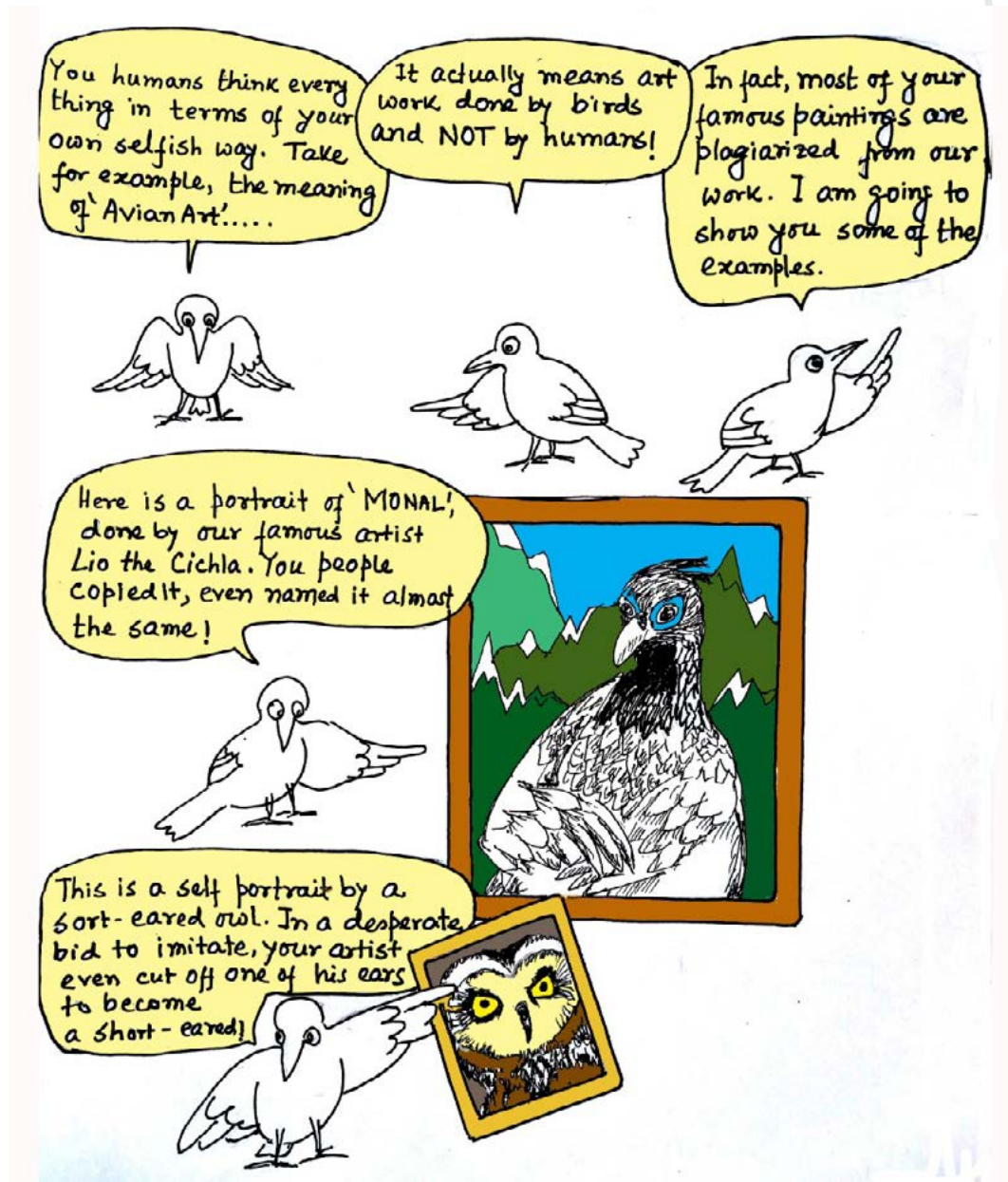
Even under these deteriorating conditions this wetland is producing more than our expectation, but the question is– for how long?..

Dipprovo - a nature lover, wildlife photographer, traveller, sports-freak and a student with keen interest in conservation of threatened & rare species. Currently pursuing his Bachelors' study at Siliguri.



CARTOON

Supriyo Ghatak



Supriyo Ghatak is an engineer turned teacher. Now posted near Jalpaiguri, where wandering through the hills and forests form his favourite relaxation. While he paints and sketches, drawing cartoons is a subject close to his heart.



HOW DO YOU CHOOSE A PAIR OF BINOCULARS?

Arijit Banerjee

Who uses a binocular? A soldier/ law enforcement person, a disaster relief person, mariners, astronomers, wild-lifers and birdwatchers are those who use binoculars. Ok there could a tourist or hiker too in this group.

For an average Indian what are the options to go shopping for a pair? A Camera shop somewhere or online – say Amazon or Flipkart. In a shop the salesperson won't have a clue which is what and suited for which purpose (sadly true for most salesmen in India). The information on the online portal is sketchy at best.

The common brands available in India would be Nikon, Olympus, occasionally Bushnell, a few Pentax binoculars. Then there are the Zeiss, the Leicas and if you push it, the Swarovski. Sometimes with some specialized dealers, you can get Hawke or Celestron binoculars.

[There are some online portals in India which offer Opticron Binoculars at very in flated prices. I asked Peter Gamby, who heads Opticron operations in the UK. He said those were discontinued models, picked up in bulk from dealers in USA.]

Lets take Nikon as an illustration. As a company, they have a fine tradition of making optical equipment and that includes binoculars and scopes. Their India website has porro prism binoculars for Rs. 10,000 or less to roof prism bins worth Rs 80,000. Makes choosing a complex task indeed.

Another example is Pentax. You can buy the less expensive (made in China) models off Amazon. Their premium ZD line is however not available (Ricoh India apparently cannot decide on its warranty as there is no local repair unit. Internationally it carries a 30-year warranty).

Internationally most manufacturers have the actual manufacturing outsourced. Economics dictate China as the manufacturing hub. So the same Chinese factory is probably making bins for Nikon, Pentax, Olympus, Celestron, Hawke, GPO, Opticron, Maven, Bushnell, Leupold, and more. The Zeiss Terras are also made in China (but to Zeiss standards). So are GPO binoculars.

Here, quality depends on price point usually and in some cases, quality control standards set by the contracting company. What you can expect in an inexpensive binocular is plastic/ polycarbonate body, Chinese glass, often BK7 (at times BAK4 which however means different in different parts of the world). Sometimes weather sealed and nitrogen/ argon

purged. Let us say a price range from 100\$ to 400\$. The pricier ones are likely to be better made. The warranty can be iffy. It is considered pointless to repair a 100USD bin. One might as well buy a new pair given that labour cost in repair will add up to the price of a new one. In fact Leupolds and Mavens come with a lifetime replacement warranty. It goes bad you get a new pair, no questions asked.

Glass makes a difference The quality of glass, the manufacturing process, the degree of corrections against aberrations, anti-reflective coatings (which are proprietary), the phase coating on the prisms (again propriety) all impinge on the final performance and price. In reality, the glass that is most commonly used for binocular prisms is BK7. This is a Borosilicate Crown glass. Higher quality binoculars use BaK4 glass; this is a Barium Crown glass. It has a higher refractive index than BK7; this means that its critical angle is lower and that less peripheral light will be “lost” through non-total internal reflection. When light is lost through non-total internal reflection, it gives rise to blue-grey segments (‘cut-offs’ in the exit pupil).

BaK4 (Barium Crown Glass) is made by Schott of Germany (another company associated with Zeiss). The Chinese designation ‘BaK4’ is an entirely different glass to the Schott BaK4 – BaK stands for Barileichkron (Barium Crown); the Chinese BaK4 is actually equivalent to Schott PSK3, which is not a Barium Crown at all: it is phosphate crown glass. PSK3 is much cheaper to make than BaK4; it also has a lower refractive index. So do be aware of marketing hype. Know what you are paying for. Good glass has a high refractive index (1.58) and a higher Abbe number (that translates into lesser dispersion).

Another marketing tool is to use the term ‘ED Glass’. Different companies define ED glass differently. ED stands for extra low dispersion glass – glass that minimizes chromatic aberrations. Material matters (and so does design). In case of a Zeiss Alpha (or a Leica or Swarovski or even in Opticron, Nikon and Pentax high end bins), ED might mean use of calcium fluorite in their lenses –expensive. Pure fluorite crystal can be molded into lenses – but – would be extremely expensive. It has been done and used in bins and scopes though. Glass comes in infinite variety and just making two batches with the same optical performance is an art. The leading optical glass makers are Schott (part of the Zeiss Stiftung), HOYA and Ohara, Corning and of course a range of Chinese stuff.

The third marketing word is Coatings. Some will say ‘coated optics’. Some will say ‘multi-coating’ which probably means all the glass-air surfaces are coated. Some will say HD. Look for fully multicoated bins. The coatings vary from company to company. A Zeiss SF is dark pink, the Conquest HD orangish pink, the Swarovski is greenish.

Next see if the glass exteriors have water and dust repellent coating. That is very helpful, given that ours is a dusty, rain prone country. Swarodur, Locutec, Aquadura are terms indicating proprietary dust / water repellent coatings.

There are some binoculars that are totally made in Japan (Pentax ZD, probably the Nikon HGL series, Opticron Aurora etc). Then there are Japanese manufactured bins (there is a company called Kamakura who do some fine work) where the sets are exported out from Japan to the contracting company in Europe, to be reassembled and undergone a second

line of quality control e.g. Kahles (some models), Zeiss Conquest, Zeiss Victory Pocket etc. What we get here for say 500USD to around 800/900USD is metal (aluminum alloy) chassis, better armoring, better sealing and better glass lenses and prisms. Much better warranty too – 10 years to 25-30 years (limited lifetime).

The third group is European manufactured bins. Usually a magnesium alloy chassis, good rubber armoring; Excellent fit and finish and design; fine lenses, prisms, coatings, waterproof and inert gas purged (that prevents internal fogging when you step out in winter).

The Leicas are made in Portugal. The Leica Trinovids are as are the Ultravid HD+. The Noctivids – their top range, come back to Germany for reassembly – Made in Germany commands a premium price. As per German law if 10% of the manufacturing is done in country, it qualifies for the MIG label. However, the Portugal factory is top notch in every way. Leica is the only company that still makes 7x42 bins and even makes the lovely 7x35 Trinovid Classic (and a couple of more – a reintroduced (2019) remake of the Leitz Trinovids of 1954, but unfortunately not available in India). They make pocket bins and Rangefinder bins (Geovid) too. There is a Leica India store in New Delhi and an online store. In India, they are the priciest. They advertise one price. You click and then they show the GST and price goes up! (I have this feeling they are charging more than 18% GST). Fine bins they make, even if a tad traditional.

The Swarovski bins are made in Austria. Family owned business -first-rate glass and first-rate service. The rubber armoring (biodegradable) wears over the years (say 10 years or so) and customers get a free replacement of armoring when sent in. Stuff like objective cover, ocular covers, extra long eye-pieces are actually free (same is with their two competitors). They make a pocket binocular line including the newly introduced CL 7x21 Curio, the very fine CL Companion, the renowned EL range (the first double hinged bins – a design that stimulated both Zeiss and Leica to do something similar) – 8 X, 10 X 42. These have flat fields with edge-to-edge sharpness – which some like and some don't. They also make Rangefinder bins. The latest from Swarovski is the NL Pure – supposedly the best binocular line in the world – with upto 9 degrees field of vision. The SLC line has been discontinued – but is being sold in Europe as Kahles Helia (another company owned by Swarovski family that offers high end hunting gear). The CL Companions (8X, 10X30) are around Rs. 100,000 (yes there are dealers in India and their latest video ad shows Indians using their gear), the EL 8.5X42 – Rs. 1.8 lacs. The NL Pure is between Rs. 1.8 lacs and Rs 2.2 Lacs or so.

Zeiss is no doubt the oldest name in optics. Their operation started in a German city called Jena. Jena came under American and then Soviet occupation after WW2. Then Jena went to the East Germans. Post WW2, Carl Zeiss Jena was among the most recognizable names in optics but there was also the Zeiss West Germany company. After unification, Doctor, another well-respected name in optics, bought CZ Jena and operated it manufacturing bins and more till they shut shop in early 2000s. The present day Zeiss business is in Germany, as we know it today. However they have a factory in Hungary. The first line of Zeiss Victory & Conquest binoculars was made in Hungary. The feedback was negative. Now Zeiss Hungary manufacture spectacle lenses, IOL etc.

The sheer amount of empirical research in optics and glass that Zeiss funded is mind-boggling. Those who are photography buffs would recognize terms like Sonnar, Tessar, Biotar – lens designs from the Zeiss stable – and still form the basis of many zoom and prime lenses. The Hensholdt - Dialyt, the Zeiss Dialyt are some binocular designs that dictated how bins were to be made. Folklore states that the owner of Swarovski, loved outdoors and birds and used a Zeiss Dialyt. He wanted to make something better. War Time – German manufacturing was divided among Leitz (now called Leica), Zeiss and Swarovski (and some more smaller companies). In the late 1990s Zeiss went radical and introduced the FL – Abbe Koenig prisms, fluoride lenses, fibre reinforced polyamide body – the best that money could buy. Europeans called the body Plastic! Swarovski grabbed that upper end market (hunters and then birders) with the EL range.

Upper end bins are made today with magnesium alloy chassis.

Zeiss Terra line, which we have talked of are Chinese in origin (Rs. 30000 – Rs. 40000). The Zeiss Conquest (Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 130000) and Victory Pocket (Rs. 55,000 or so) are Japanese made. The Zeiss SF (Rs. 1.5 lacs – Rs 2 lacs) and HT (Rs. 2 lacs) lines are German made. Some of you might have seen the SF and they are fantastic. 8.8 degrees (8x42), sharp, contrasty, with the eyepiece so designed to push the weight backwards – leading to great ergonomics. As a company they offer fine products and fine service. They have a workshop in Bangalore.

Swarovski bins are serviced in Austria – so your dealer shall have to handle that. Leica, given their long presence in India should be having a service centre here. Nikon and others do not have service centres here in India for bins. Modern bins need laser collimators and nitrogen purging systems and seal repairs – not the task for neighborhood dada.

There are some more European manufacturers – Meopta out of Czech Republic, Blaser of Germany etc. They make good binoculars. Japanese companies like Kowa, Opticron out of UK are some of the other well reputed manufacturers.

So what do you buy? For someone on a budget, go the porro way. A decent porro is far better than a cheap roof. Look after your binoculars. Don't try wiping the dust off – the lenses get scratched. Wash them if they are waterproof. Do not bump them, drop them – plastic breaks and cracks and the smallest crack will screw up the sealing, bring dust in and fungus in. Chose a metal chasis over plastic. Chose a waterproof bin over the nonwater proofed one. Go for a wider field of vision. Know the country of origin.

Check out what Nikon offers. They do have a wide range of products on offer.

If birding/ wildlife is a profession – a tour operator, a researcher, a forester – invest in a good pair. It need not be Rs. 2 lacs but could be Rs 75000. Better made, more pleasure and comfort. No eye aches / headaches. Helps you identify subjects better in critical situations. Could save your butt from an elephant in musth stalking you. If you take care of it (there are no electronics to go bad), they will last 20 years or more if backed by great service. Rs. 75000 in 20 years translates to Rs. 300 odd a month. That is what – 2 plates of Biriyani?

Funnily enough the difference in performance in a 300USD bin and 800 USD bin will be striking. Sharper, more contrast, wider field, better built, easy to carry. The difference between 800USD bin and 2000 USD bin will be far less and not very easy to make out.

The photographer – does he need bins? That is a question he needs to answer himself. I feel yes, it helps spotting things that are far away, sometimes camouflaged. That camera – 800 grams, the lens – 2kg to 4kg, batteries, backpack -it could be too much. There are light-weight options. Look at 8x30, 8x32, 8x25, 10X25 - barely 300gm – 600 gm. In the light that you can photograph, these will do so very well. In good modern bins, the difference between a 8x32 and a 8x42 is actually minuscule – such has been the advancements in design and materials. In Rajasthan the light is far better. In Arunachal the light usually sucks. So 42mm vs 32 mm – you shall have to decide for yourself. An 8x is held to be good for birding. But a 7x will give a wider field and bigger depth of field. The 10X will be heavier, with a narrower field, may lead to hand shake but will show more detail and do better in low light. Preferences are individual. You may be ok with a narrow but very well corrected bright field. Someone else might prefer a wide field.

Herping, flowers, insects, butterflies. This is a niche area. You can use any bin. But do take a look at the Pentax Papilo II. Made in China, plastic, and not weather sealed. But superbly sharp and contrasty, these are reverse porro prism binoculars designed to watch things close and focus as close as 50cm. The detail it reveals is incredible. Comes in 6.5X21 and 8.5X21. You can use them for casual birding too at a pinch.

Now how do you chose between a High End Nikon – Rs. 80,000 (say 8x42) and a Zeiss Conquest 8x42 Rs.80,000? Ask about post sales service, handle both of them if you can. See if it fits your hands comfortably. Check the case and strap. Invest wisely. Again, at the end of the day you shall have to decide what is best for you.

While using a binocular do hold them in line with your eyes. Adjust the hinge so that you see one image. There is usually a slight vision difference between 2 eyes. That is why Binoculars have a diopter correction. It is an additional wheel beneath the eyepiece on the right barrel (sometimes it is beneath the central focusing wheel). Focus your bins on a stationary, well-lit subject that has details/ contrast. Close your right eye. Look through the left and adjust focus till the subject is crisp. Then pull up the diopter adjustment ring. Then close the left eye and view through the right. Adjust the diopter ring till the image is crystal clear and sharp. Push down the diopter ring. It should stay set. When you lend the bin to a friend, he/she will change the interpupillary distance (we all have different faces), so you will have to change it back. Same is with the dioptre. Try not to float the binocular in the air while viewing. Anchor it on the bridge of your nose or beneath your brow. Be comfortable first and do be safe. Look where you are stepping.

Comparative of various Binoculars available:

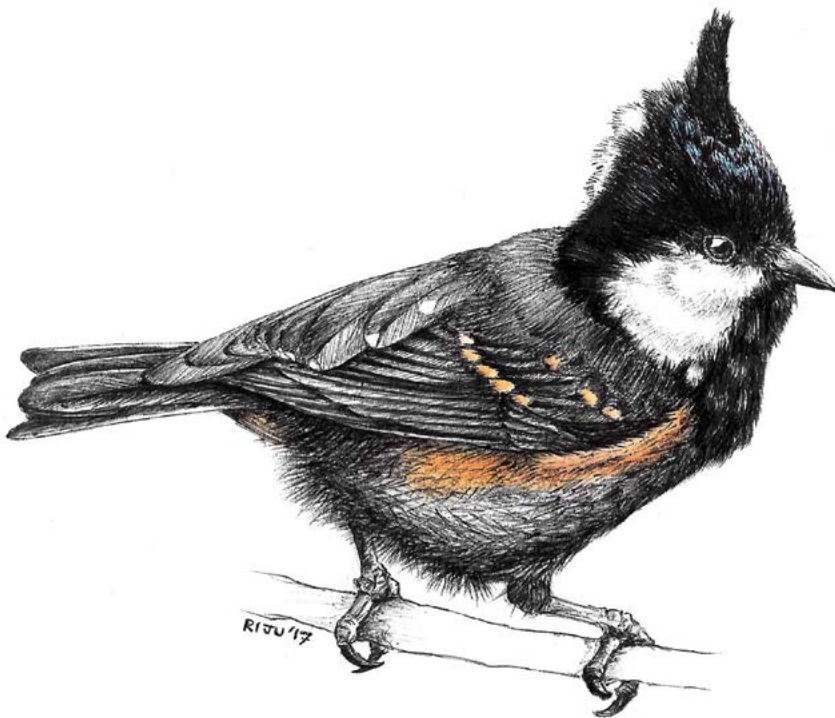
These prices are what are available on the web. The table is just to give an idea how wide the range could be. If you know someone who knows someone else or the local dealer, you may expect a discount of MRP, anything between 10% to 20%. Red Dot, Blue Shield, Hawk emblem – flaunt it and make others envious.

At no point do I suggest you need to get the costliest binocular. Costly equipment will not make you a better birder. It might and probably will make birding more enjoyable. Whatever you decide to buy be happy and use it. Very importantly respect your purchase and look after it.

Model	Size	Type	Close Focus (mts)	Field of View (mts@ 1000 mts)	Weight (gms)	Eye relief (mm)	Exit Pupil (mm)	Price in Rs. (approx.)
Nikon Monarch 5	8x42	Roof	2.5	110	590	19.5	5.3	27,950
Nikon Monarch 7	10x42	Roof	2.5	117	660	16.5	4.2	41,950
Nikon Monarch HG	8X30	Roof	2.0	145	450	16.2	3.8	79,950
Nikon Prostaff 3S	10x42	Roof	3	122	575	15.7	4.2	16,450
Nikon Action EX	7x35	Porro	5	163	800	17.3	5	11250
Nikon Aculon A211	7x35	Porro	5	163	685	11.8	5	6950
Pentax SP	8X40	Porro	5	143	771	13	5	7099
Pentax SP WP	8x40	Porro	5	122	900	20	5	14,995
Pentax SD WP	8x42	Roof	2.5	131	640	21	5.3	21,249
Pentax Papilio II	6.5X21	Reverse Porro	0.5	131	289	15	3.2	14,995
Pentax ZD ED	8X43	Roof	2	110	714	22	5.4	56,249 (as indicated by Ricoh India. Not yet available online)
Olympus S	8x40	Porro	4	143	715	12	5	8699
Olympus EX WPI	10X42	Roof	3	105	660	14	5	27990
CelestronCometron	7x50	Porro	8	109	774	13	7.1	5575
Celestron Outland X	8x42	Roof	4.5	119	600	18	5.3	11614
Celestron Nature DX ED	8X42	Roof	4.5	119	600	18	5.3	26,999
Zeiss Terra ED	8X32	Roof	5.3	135	725	16.5	4	34,115
Zeiss Terra ED	8X42	Roof	5.3	125	725	18	5.3	39,950
Zeiss Terra ED	10X42	Roof	5.3	110	725	14	4.2	39,950
Zeiss Victory Pocket	8x25	Roof	1.9	130	290	16.5	3.1	59,950
Zeiss Victory Pocket	10x25	Roof	1.9	105	290	16.5	2.5	64,950
Zeiss Conquest HD	8X32	Roof	1.5	140	630	16	4	74,950
Zeiss Conquest HD	8X42	Roof	2	128	795	18	5.3	94,950
Zeiss Conquest HD	10X42	Roof	2	115	795	18	4.2	99,950
Zeiss Terra ED Pocket	8x25	Roof	1.9	119	310	16	3.1	27,950
Zeiss Terra ED Pocket	10x25	Roof	1.9	97	310	16	2.5	29,950
Zeiss Conquest HD	8X56	Roof	3.5	125	125	18	7	1,29950
Zeiss Victory SF	8X32	Roof	1.95	155	600	19	40	1,89950
Zeiss Victory SF	8X42	Roof	1.5	144	790	18	5.3	2,19950
Zeiss Victory SF	10X32	Roof	1.95	130	590	19	3.2	1,94500

Model	Size	Type	Close Focus (mts)	Field of View (mts@ 1000 mts)	Weight (gms)	Eye relief (mm)	Exit Pupil (mm)	Price in Rs. (approx.)
Zeiss Victory SF	10x42	Roof	1.5	120	790	18	4.2	224,950
Leica Trinovid HD	8X32	Roof	1	124	652	17	4	90,000
Leica Trinovid HD	8x42	Roof	1.8	123.5	730	17	5.25	1,04,000
Leica Trinovid HD	10X42	Roof	1.62	103	730	15	4.2	1,08,000
Leica Trinovid HD	10X32	Roof	1	113	660	16	3.2	94,999
Leica Ultravid HD +	8x32	Roof	2.1	134.13	535	13.3	4	1,91,000
Leica Ultravid HD +	10X32	Roof	2	116.86	565	13.2	3.2	1,96,000
Leica Ultravid HD +	7X42	Roof	3.3	140	770	17	6	2,17,000
Leica Ultravid HD +	8x42	Roof	3	129.15	790	15.5	5.2	2,22,000
Leica Ultravid HD+	10X42	Roof	2.9	112	750	16	4.2	2,26,000
Leica Ultravid BR	8x20	Roof	1.8	113.2	241	15	2.5	74,500
Leica Ultravid BR	10x25	Roof	3.2	90.6	265	15	2.5	77,500
Leica Trinovid BCA	8x20	Roof	3	112.9	235	14	2.5	50,000
Leica Trinovid BCA	10x25	Roof	5	90.6	255	14.6	2.5	55,000
Leica Noctivid	8x42	Roof	1.9	135	860	19	5.2	2,45,000
Leica Noctivid	10X42	Roof	1.9	112	860	19	4.2	2,55,000
Swarovski CL Companion	8x30	Roof	3	132	490	16	3.8	1,04,000
Swarovski EL W B	8.5x42	Roof	3.3	133	835	20	4.9	1,80,000
Swarovski NL Pure	8X32	Roof	2	150	640	18	4	1,90,000
Swarovski NL Pure	8X42	Roof	2	159	840	18	5.3	2,00,000

Arijit is an Indian Forest Service Officer (Rajasthan Cadre). Though a botanist by education and a forester by training, birding as a hobby transcends his education and training.



Coal Tit

Abhishek Das



ROLE OF NEIGHBORHOOD BIRDING IN BIRDER MATURITY

Souvik Roychoudhary

We get matured in our birding and bird photography skills as we observe and photograph more and more birds. In many such sessions we learn a few things on the field or realize mistakes made when we come back home and go through the images. Neighborhood birding can play a great role in accelerating us in our journey of increasing maturity. While we would love to go to places like Neora Valley or Gajoldoba or Singalila where we can enjoy beautiful landscapes of nature along with a lot many (rare) varieties of birds and increase our lifer counts but it is not possible to make that trip every week due to cost, office/personal commitments and need of advance planning (e.g. booking tickets, guide, stay etc.). However, we can do neighborhood birding 365 days a year at no cost and not going away from office or family commitments and can do that by deciding in the last minute if needed. This article is to share my experience on how neighborhood birding (mostly in Rajarhat) helped me in my birding journey and hope reader might find a point or two useful.

I stay in Newtown and I am blessed that way as Rajarhat wetland is close by. But for most in Kolkata it is less than an hour's drive and those outside Kolkata would have similar places in rural areas. In fact, I would include places like Rabindra Sarovar, Baraipur (my birth place), Shyamkhola, CKBS, Bosipota, Diara, Dankuni etc. also in the list of broader neighborhood hotspots as with an early rise from bed, we can make a quick trip on a morning and carry on with the daily duties normally.

Lesson 1 - Checking camera gears before leaving for the field.

Sadly, there were few instances when I reached the field and just when I tried taking the picture, I found the camera was not working. It might be the battery stayed on the charger (or empty from past use) or the memory card remained in the laptop (or full as it was not cleared after the last trip). In a few cases I had to come back for the gear as I didn't have the spare with me. It's possible if you are close by. However, I am sure if I didn't get that hard lesson, I would have done it in out of station trips where I wouldn't have the option to quickly come to hotel and go back and would have missed the session. Sadly, I repeated this a few times as initially I was checking things in the morning when we are in a hurry after waking up and missed something (cap, wallet, phone, rain cover, tripod, monopod etc.). Now I check the camera and other gears and get the bag ready the night before and the only work I leave for the morning is to put the camera in the bag and take wallet & phone.

Lesson 2 – Getting familiar with the camera

I moved to Sony gears just before the Thattekad trip. I was a Nikon (& earlier Cannon) shooter. It was a new system. I did watch the Youtube videos on the flight and did try a few things at home but when I was on the field, I struggled big time. It was a week long trip and even though I took thousands of pictures, I still couldn't master the camera. It happened only when I came back and kept trying it on the Moorhens, Striated Grassbirds, Bengal Bushlarks, Bitterns of Rajarhat and slowly learned all that the camera had to offer. Learned how best to use it's features and created a muscle memory that helped me quickly shift from taking picture of a static bird to a flying one. Practiced how I could change ISO, Shutter & Aperture without taking my eyes off from view finder. Configured and reconfigured the custom buttons and function menus till they served me the best possible ways.

Lesson 3 – Learning focusing skills

Most if not all of us started photographing in 'automatic' mode and then shifted to Manual or Aperture priority. There is a learning curve when we do that. The more pictures we take under varied light conditions, the better we get. That feel for how low the shutter we can take to keep ISO & grains low yet minimize risk of softness due to handshake effect can only come with experience. Similarly, how high we take the shutter when we are taking pictures of birds swimming on water or flying on the sky needs a feel based on how fast the bird is moving. Even better is (time permitting) turning off the VR if the shutter is very high. Taking a deep breath to get ready for the shot and holding the breath when we do fire the shutter is a habit it took time for me to acquire. In fact, how to hold the long tele lens, where to hold it, how to tuck my elbow so that it acts like a stabilizer all came with practice in neighborhood. I would be missing those in field when the moment comes if I would not have done all again & again. One specific example is working with varying lights which is very common in North Bengal forests. I practiced this in CKBS which also has contrasting areas of bright light and dark patches. I realized in some light conditions, probably I better opt for aperture priority over my usual preferred mode or manual with auto ISO. When I do struggle in field, I often look for that condition in neighborhood and determine what would have been the right setting.

Lesson 4 – Composing the frame

In the beginning, I started firing shots (again & again) from the same position often taking identical pictures that I had to delete later. Then started realizing the importance of background and started practicing moving around after the first few shots are taken to get a clearer and nicer background. Say the position I first saw the bird had sky as the background. But noticed there are trees on the far on the right side. So, I moved to my left so that those trees appear as creamy green backdrop to the bird on perch. I shot dozens of images of Greater Coucal once to practice this technique. Also, the gut feel of depth of field came as I tried background separation by taking pictures of Red vented Bulbul with tree or wall at different distances on the backdrop. Learned moving focus points quickly to the side and framing the bird on one of the sides leaving space in front instead of always focusing on center. Generally, most of our snaps are on Landscape mode and I found taking it in Portrait mode (when bird is vertical and close by) had issues in balancing. I found the right posture by taking pictures of Striated Grassbird which often seats upright. Soon realized I better stay with spot focus while dealing with bird in bush and learned how to focus on

it through branches. Finally tried different combinations of weathers like in mist, rain, and silhouette etc. The following picture of Indian Silverbill was taken on a rainy day at my daughter's campus (IISER Bhopal) which is neighborhood birding place for her – the bird trying to shield the rest from torrential rain, is one of my favorite picture.



Silverbill, Bhopal

Lesson 5 –Trying photography gears and related choices

Initially, I used to carry the camera on hand holding the collar mount handle. Soon realized it is tiring and more importantly limiting my abilities to use binoculars. Tried hanging it from neck (something I request all to avoid) only to get pain and spasm. Was worried to trust gears worth of lakhs of rupees on a strap but did my research and happily settled on Blackrapids shoulder strap. Encouraged by few Youtubers, experimented with Tripod but realized trading few better quality pictures against many missed shots. Practiced with Monopod which I found is an interim option to stabilize if need be though handheld is what I found the optimum choice. Reader may check what works best by trying these at neighborhood. Taking video is a challenge especially with DSLR where we need to operate with back LCD. You can try monopod in this case. Or a combination of DSLR for picture and Nikon P900 or something similar as second camera for video. Experimented with 1.4 teleconverter on Indian Pond Heron to gauge the extent of fall in sharpness in favor of larger image which came in handy when I tried it in Purulia on Indian Eagle Owl. During rain, realized hard way that we cannot operate with umbrella and moved to camera & lens rain cover. Shoe, cap and clothing are key to our success as we need to walk through wet fields or bush full of thorns or sweat in high humidity or burn in sun and trying different options in neighborhood would help decide what works best for you (e.g. full sleeve vs half sleeve, advantage of breathable T-shirt, need of waterproof shoe). A cold morning trip to Bosipota showed why I needed gloves with fingertips open and helped me greatly in Singalila trip later. Realized it would be easier to record the bird call/song with a dedicated device (I use Sony recorder) with one click record option instead of trying it with mobile and it helped me capture 100+ calls in a year without missing any picture.

Lesson 6 – Learning and identifying birds

This is a continuous process and a journey instead. I must say I learned what to read & remember and how to make the maximum out of the bird identification books (like Grimmett&Inskipp) by going to neighborhood fields and trying the knowledge on common birds. Remembering the body parts, body shapes, ID pointers, behavior, habitat etc. are not easy and takes a long time. It's been a wonderful experience to observe Little Grebe creating nest, carrying the little one on its wings, the chicks growing slowly, learning to swim, mother showing them how to catch a fish – just by regularly visiting a nearby pond throughout the summer & winter. Saw how Scaly breasted Munias build their nest by observing it at my residential society (Greenwood Sonata). During lockdown, my morning routine was to have tea and wait for the Shikras to fly by my 13th floor balcony. Learned how to differentiate male, female & juvenile Shikra, how a juvenile change it's body pattern slowly as it turns adult. After thousands of failed attempts learned how to gauge the flight pattern of Little Swift which came handy when I took picture of Nepal House Martin in Rongtong. Got a feel on what habitat would lead to which bird. When rainwater got deposited opposite of Bhawanipur Education Society campus in Rajarhat, I guessed we could see some snipes there and could snap 3 Greater Painted Snipes side by side. Taking early steps in identifying birds by calls as I practice in neighborhood. Got a great open perch shot of Dusky Warbler by identifying it's call and then hiding myself in a nearby bush to give it a feel of safety. When I saw the snipe in the picture flashing from a few feet away, I remembered Grimmett said the flight pattern of Common Snipe is erratic while I observed this one was consistent as it should be for Pin-tailed or Swinhoe's Snipe. Though I couldn't differentiate the last 2 but after several missed attempts at least I know what to look for.



Snipe, Rajarhat

Hope the reader can relate his experience to this article and wish them good luck as they walk their own journey in getting to be a better and more matured birder & photographer by more & more visits to their neighborhood as I continue to do in Rajarhat Newtown.

Souvik is a senior IT professional observing wildlife for over 2 decades. Started bird photography since 2017. Lives in Kolkata.



UP THERE! (PART -2)

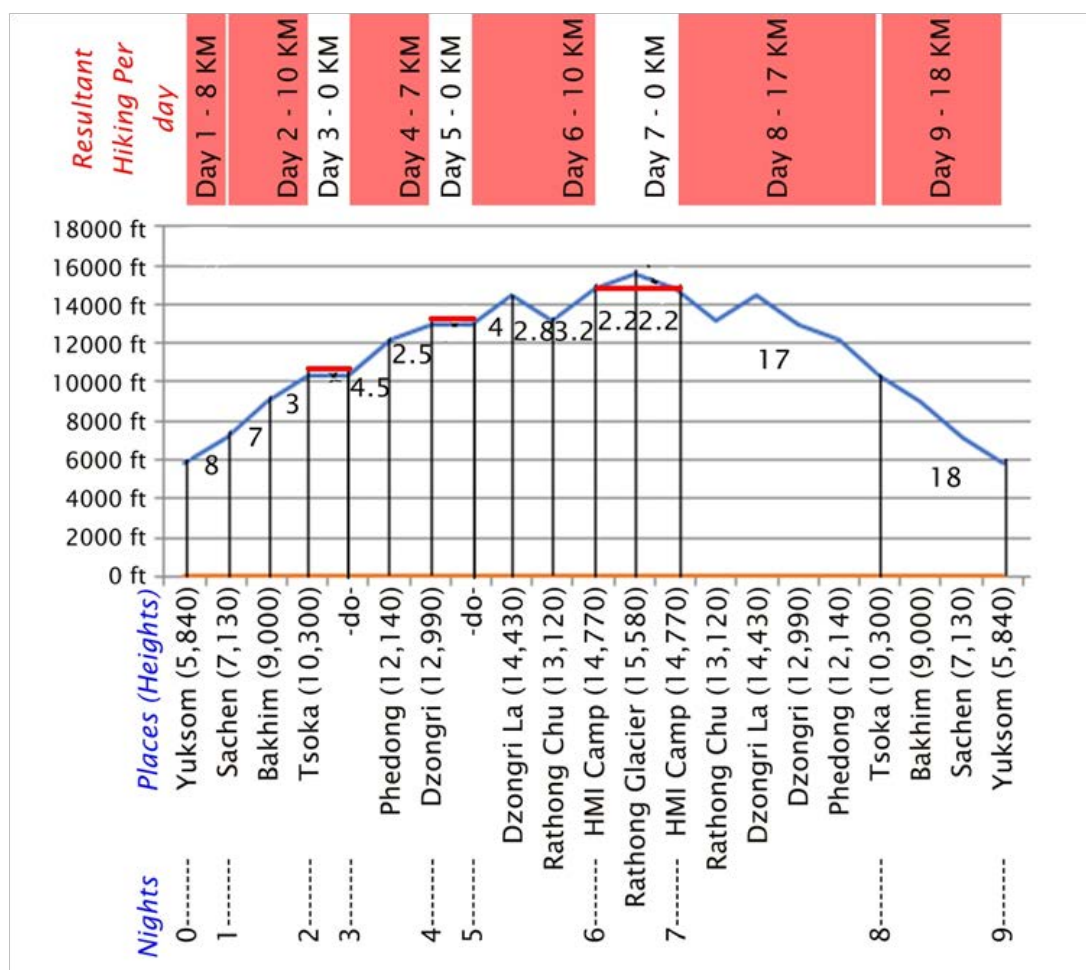
Dibyendu Ash and Rozan Dhungel

The fingers that roll and adjust binocular focus, are writing this part to relieve the monotony of the profession. In the previous part, we narrated the first four days of our 10-day trekking cum bird watching trip at Khangchenzonga National Park (till 1st December); when we stayed in a Dzongri nomadic hut; here in this part we would tell you the later stories for the rest of the trekking journey.

2nd December 2020:

We commenced our birding following the trail that runs to the northwest of the Dzongri. It was still very early and even before the sun had come out; birds were already active. We saw a troop of Black-faced Laughingthrushes hopping on the bushes. I managed to

Day-wise trekking chart



get a decent shot in low-light conditions. Little later a flock of White-winged Grosbeak was seen at a distance! We were awestruck by the autumn hue of dried Heracleum, Aconogonum, Bistorta, and other drab and dry wild plants. The seeds attract lots of finches and tits. So, we found big parties of Periparusspecies feeding on these bush berries. Post breakfast (rice and yak meat for a change), we decided to hike up to the Kame terrace edge at the western side of the Dzongri Valley. The periglacial landforms, both present in relict and active forms - all around would make you a stern Dzongriaficionado! The weather turned bad soon after our morning birding session. I was happy as I recorded some extremely low-frequency calls of Snow Pigeons, which were foraging on campus-kitchen leftovers. In general, it becomes challenging to record bird calls with lower frequency levels for doves, etc., as white-noise is omnipresent. A Himalayan Monal played hide-and-seek in the fog -cloaked afternoon. This individual dragged us almost a kilometer around, literally throughout the valley, but the utter cunningness of the pheasant always kept it out of our camera sight! As the weather turned bad, we also stopped chasing any more birds. It was drizzling and snowflakes fluttered down from the sky, some were caught on the fleece fibers on top of jackets! Sooner, as the darkness covered the valley, Tencho lit up the kero stove. The silence broke, laddish jokes and buzzing stove noise kept our camp very delightful.

3rd December 2020:

The stone-and-log hut had ensured a warm cozy night leaving us well-rested and fresh to take on the rigors of a cold winter day at Dzongri. Bracing ourselves with adequate protection, we decided to explore the surroundings before starting our day at HMI Camp at Rathong.

We turned around to see the Dzongri Valley spread before us in the shadow of the towering cliffs. The clear cloudless morning allowed us to see the whole valley in perspective.

At 6:30 AM we started hiking and headed to the northwest of the valley toward Black Kabru Pass or



Dzongri La. Just as we were scanning the hills for early birding activity, we noticed a flock of Accentors and Mountain Finches circling over before settling on a bare tree some distance away. Binoculars revealed these to be Plain Mountain Finches and Alpine Accentors. The pass, that we would cross is at a considerable height, well 14,435ft! We started ascending, and within an hour and a half reached the base of Black Kabru Pass. From here till the top of the pass, a large flock of Grandalas and squeaking noise of Snow Partridges enticed us. The flock of Grandalas obliged us and perched on wavy dwarf junipers. The Snow Partridges were calling high above from the rocky granite gneiss wall, well beyond our reach! There were very few records of Snow Partridges from this part. As the pass was very windy, we could not spend much time there, nor we could record its call. We descended a little down from the pass, Bhaila-Tencho, and the Dzogs caught us. From here we could see the HMI campus, glittering at the northernmost vertex below Frey's Peak. We had a great distance to cover still! Just by seeing the magnitude of hike left, I and Rozan laughed at each other!



Typical Landscape Above 13000 feet

From Black Kabru pass (14,435 ft) to trekking down at Rathong Chu (13,100 ft) required almost no effort. We could not find much activity of birds, other than sporadic appearances of Alpine Accentor and some Large Carpodacus rosefinches. Down at the RathongKhola , pink river weeds dazzled along the flowing water. We spent a few minutes, besides the river and on the tiny log bridge structured over the Khola.

This place is also known as Chowrikhang. Some shepherds' shed and its remnants were strewn all around. We came across multiple Eurasian Wrens and some Redstarts from this patch. We moved on only to stop periodically to see several small birds - mostly Tits by the waterside. After crossing the Chowrikhang meadows, a vast stretch of rockpile moraine appeared. It was fun to walk on this bouldery trail, but with high chances of twisting and hurting ankles by falling on the stone creases. With the sun almost on the



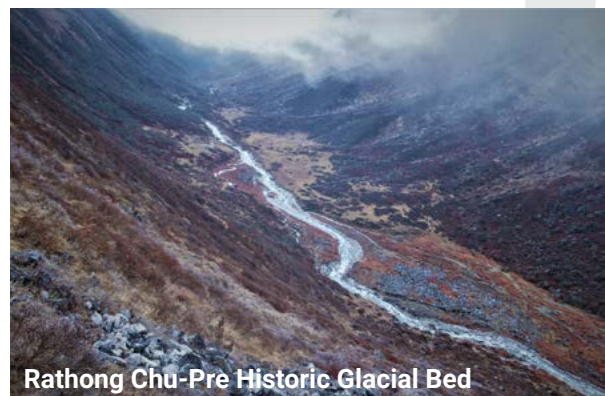
Blue Sheep at Chowrikhang

horizon, we ultimately trudged to the HMI campus by 4:15 PM. Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI) base camp is at 14,700 ft in the middle of a massive flat bowl flanked by the Khangchendzonga mountain range.

After sundown, the entire gorge was flooded by moonlight and some choughs flew over and vanished behind the ridge. Roughly scrambled rock spread across granite gneiss walls kissed the sky, with seven and eight-thousanders as our neighbors for the night of 3rd December 2020. In the illuminated yet dark night at the edge of a glacial moraine, the cracking sounds of the geological activities continue deep inside the earth's crust. Somewhere else wilderness of Sikkim sleeps soundly under the buzzing sound of crickets and howling dogs of villages. The next day, we planned to continue our search for the birds around glacial lakes. We were rewarded with the sightings of some more birds that were all around.

4th December 2020:

This morning we were up well before usual. The peaks changed their colors with the rising sun in different hues. We also started hiking up thereby following a small flock of Choughs on the top of a cliff. There was plenty of other activity of Alpine Accentors and Red-mantled Rosefinches. There was also a brave 'Altai Accentor' that was busy probing and prodding the hard turf ground looking for tidbits.



Rathong Chu-Pre Historic Glacial Bed



Rathong Glacier

After 8 AM, we could not see any birds lurking in the open harsh sun. Accentors stayed inside the stone creases and holes. Though some White-winged Redstarts and Great Rosefinches showed up at different corners. We moved up one step at a time, toward the glacial tongue of Rathong, where the magnificent frozen lake is. We spent an hour at the edge of the frozen lake in a customary way. The light was a bit harsh since it was almost 10 AM. Nepal border was just some stone throwing distance away from us, followed by the depressing ridge between Frey's peak and Rathong peak, the alley in between is the path. However, walking on a glacier is next to impossible; as that is full of crevasses. So, the glacier acts as a natural barrier.

Here, some GSI (Geological Survey of India) Installations were also present. Those continuously monitor all the glacial, climatic, and seismic activities of the Khangchendzonga Zoo-geologic Complex. It is important to note that Rathong glacier is one of the fast-receding glaciers of modern time—thus it is continually studied by geologists of different institutions. We started descending from Glacier complex by 10 AM and entered the HMI campus within one hour. In the camp, brunch was ready. Upon our arrival, Tencho served us smoking hot fried rice with some spicy boiled vegetable soup. After having the filling food, we decided to explore another side of the HMI campus. We sat at the edge of the cliff, which was a nice vantage point for raptor watching. Himalayan Griffon was seen soaring in a thermal. A flock of Grandalas also appeared and soon moved out of our sight. We spent a little time, with the Red-fronted Rosefinches which were moving around the hedges. Red-fronted Rosefinches are infrequently seen, as they are extremely high-altitude dwellers. Some sparse records exist for this species throughout the Himalayas.

What a day it was! Experiencing glacial ecology and birds around it! It was the last day of our ascent. The next day we would go down. And if things went well as planned then in just next two days we would reach Yuxsom. It took seven days to come up to this height while going back we would cover the entire path in just two days! What an irony! Tencho's most coveted soup arrived in the afternoon. The gloomy and misty afternoon prohibited us to go out any further. The afternoons and evenings were always well spent with Mr. Dawa Sherpa, who is the caretaker of the camp. Various groups of mountaineers, scientists, research scholars come here; but Mr. Sherpa stays here all year long. A very good-natured and good-humored fellow, who has unlimited stocks of stories.

5th December 2020:

For the last time, we woke up on our final day to witness the beautiful sunrise over the Khangchendzonga range; we witnessed the magnificence of the guardian deity - the mighty Khangchendzonga range very closely. Since the morning at 5:30 AM, the weather was not in favor of hiking. However, with our ponchos on, we moved out for our daily grind—birdwatching!

A big flock of Red-fronted Rosefinches accompanied us for nearly 100 meters down. It was still very early and even before the sun had come out, birds were already active. We saw a troop of Black-faced Laughingthrush hopping near Rathong khola. I managed to get a decent shot in low-light conditions. From Rathong khola to Black Kabru Pass is a considerable steep hike. Here we double-checked for mountain goat antelopes. It was just 9:30 when we passed Black Kabru Pass, but the weather started turning bad. So, we hurriedly reached Dzongri main campus by 11:30 AM. Heavy snowfall and high wind stalled us for nearly 30 minutes. We had simmering hot coffee at the canteen. At 12:30 we started hiking again toward Tsoka. Following the snow-covered corduroy trail, when we reached Tsoka it was 2:30 PM on our clock.

The rest of the team, Tencho and others arrived a little later and set up the tents at the usual place, below the trees beside the monastery. A 17-kilometer trek in this god forbidden terrain was definitely not a joke. As we set ourselves inside the tent, we slipped inside our sleeping bags and retired for the day.

6th December 2020:

On these long winter nights, we had spent more than 10 hours of sleep. Around 5 AM we move out of the tent. Outside, the grass was frosted! We spent a little time at Tsoka before departing for Yuxsom. Bhaila prepared some noodles with dried meat, which was the last dish he prepared for us for this trip. We finished our breakfast and hurriedly descended to Sachen for the birds from morning spells. Scaly Laughingthrush, Chestnut Thrush, and Brown Bullfinch were highlights from Bakhim and Sachen complex.

In between Sachen and Yuxsom, a landslide had taken place. So, the regular route had been diverted and we would have to go through a forested patch above. I and Rozan took the long turn and just after gaining some height, we came across nearly hundreds of Great Barbet. Such huge congregations I had never seen for barbets.



Rozan and I... at HMI Campus

At a leisurely pace, we arrived at Yuksom by 2 PM. A car from Limboo Homestay was waiting to receive us. We were amazed to see all the arrangements upon entering the homestay. Hot towels, saltwater baths for a pedicure, refreshment drinks, and fruits were something we were not at all expecting after this tiring 9-day long trekking. After freshening up, we came out in the lobby and discussed our trekking experience sitting beside the cozy corner of the fireplace.

The rich trekking life that fostered my spirit, is captured in this two-part story. Trekkers jostle with each other and with the spirits who want to revisit trudging by tick-infested paths repeatedly. The bottom line is local communities are key to the success of any travel story, especially in the tough mountainous region. It has a better chance of being aligned with what the readers want and need. Tencho (9593883458), Bhaila (9593672957), and Limboo Homestay (8348167763) collaboratively and effectively protect the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve and the surrounding natural ecosystem, on which our future depends.

Dibyendu - Founder of GoingWild LLP, freelance naturalist, with over a decade of birding in the North-East. A passionate trekker with biased love for Sikkim and its birds!

Rozan - A passionate bird lover and bird guide from Sikkim. Apart from bird watching, he loves solo-trekking to the remotest parts of his hill state with his guitar as accompaniment.



POWER OF IMAGINATION

Nizar Virani

It was the month of May 2020 when Kolkata was impacted by I AM Fine (Amphan) - a cyclonic condition!

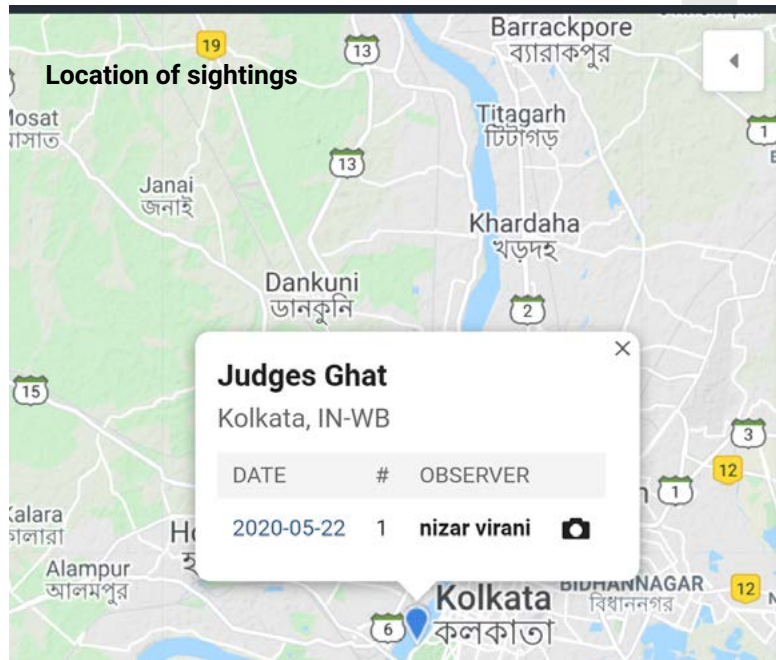
The next morning upon waking up all I could see was an urban jungle with trees and branches strewn all over and my area waterlogged ... the one thing that struck me was the discussion that had taken place in our Whatsapp "ask id" group on the 20th was that there were chances of Pelagic birds being pulled in by the storm. I waited patiently for the water to subside before I could step out.

Finally on the 22nd morning, after looking up on FB pages that Pelagic birds like Bridled Tern, Sooty Tern and Frigatebirds had been sighted I ventured out at 7 am and headed towards Babughat and Judges Ghat! I waited there patiently and yesss! was delighted to sight a "Lesser Crested Tern" and "Great Crested Tern".

However, little did I know that my luck was going to turn more favourable and more Divine!

On the 21st night, being an 'imaginist', and an ardent follower of - Just Imagine, who believe in the "Law of Attraction", I had imagined sighting Rarest of the Rare Birds along with writing a purpose of manifesting this Imagination which I did as along with the Lesser Crested Tern and Great Crested Tern, I also sighted the Rarest of Rare "Bridled Tern" a first for Kolkata City and then things got even more divine when during my patient wait at Babu Ghat I noticed a small bird at some distance flying slow and very close to the water. From afar it looked like a little swift; I took a few shots and then decided to head home.

Usually, on clicking birds that I have already spotted earlier, I delete the pictures, but for some reason I let the pictures of the supposed Little Swift be!



Wilson's Storm Petrel

I reached home, downloaded the pictures & felt extremely blessed for the sightings of the Lesser Crested Tern, Great Crested Tern & The Bridled Tern.

Later, on the 25th of May, while going through a discussion in our WhatsApp group, wherein one of the members Priyam mentioned that even the Wilson's Storm-Petrel has a white rump-like the Little Swift with the difference being the Petrels legs - my mind immediately shifted back to the bird I had clicked thinking it to be a Little Swift. I rechecked my pictures and to my amazement, I could notice the legs!

This got me excited and I immediately put up the bird on 'Ask id' page on Facebook for confirmation and BINGO! the bird was confirmed as a "Wilson's Storm Petrol" - the first-ever sighting from West Bengal and the Northeast side of India!!!

I felt supremely Blessed and Grateful for this sighting and truly felt it to be divinely guided by the Law Divine & the Abundant Universe where my imagination had turned into a Reality! I genuinely feel the Universe conspired to bless me with this divine and super awesome sighting!!!

Grateful I AM to my Mentor Mr Mahesh Toshniwal for teaching me the Law Divine - its ways and tools.



Bridled Tern

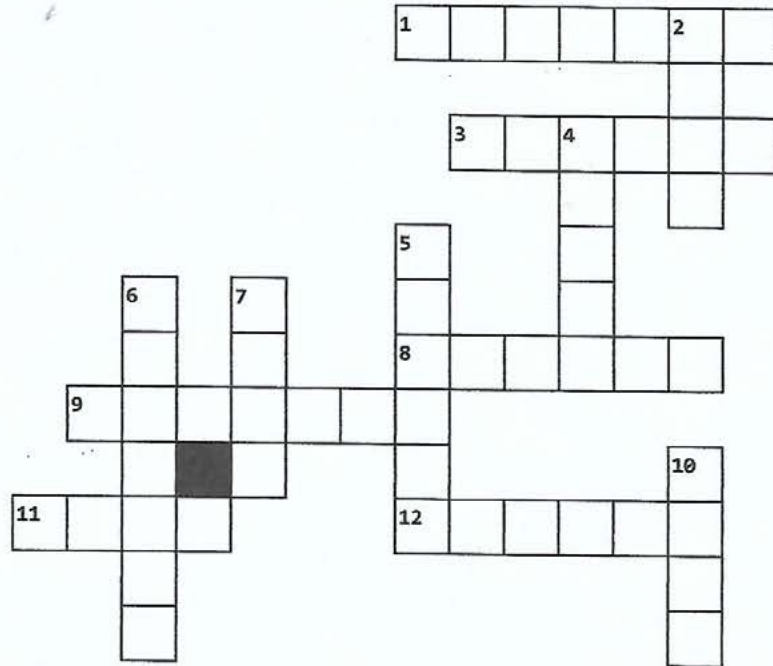


Wilson's Storm-Petrel

Nizar Virani, an imaginit, who lives in Kolkata, an avid birdwatcher, table tennis enthusiast who loves to cook and at times strums the guitar.

CROSSWORD

Avian Astronomy



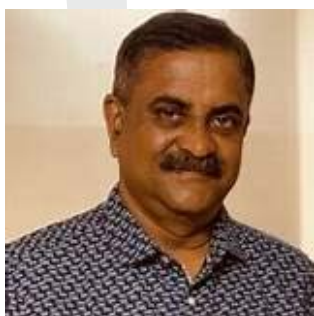
Across

1. Nebula that is part of Swan constellation
3. Named after the Crow
8. Named after the Swan
9. Named after the Pigeon
11. Number of constellation named after birds
12. Named after the Eagle

Down

2. Named after the No-feet bird or Bird of Paradise
4. Nebula named after the egg of this bird
5. Named after the Toucan
6. Born again bird of Harry Potter
7. Named after the Crane
10. Named after the Peacock

Answer : Page 94



INDIAN PARADISE FLYCATCHER: A LIFE CYCLE

Sibananda Bhanja

It was in June 2021 and by virtue of my transfer I landed up at Durgapur in West Bengal popularly known as Steel city.

In the course of interactions with bird photographers in the neighbourhood, we came to know about Garh jungle where the famous Shyamarupa Maa temple exists. The vicinity being a harbouring place of Indian Paradise Flycatcher.

The following Sunday morning me and wife landed up there at Garh Jungle and met a few birders cum photographers who led us to the locality and luckily we spotted an Indian Paradise Flycatcher nest on a branch of a tree. We stood at a distance and watched in awe as the parent birds went about their parenting business. We shot images to our hearts' content without disturbing the birds.

Thus began our story of regularly visiting the same place early in the morning continuously for 13 days documenting the cycle of life from Egg laying till finally the young 3 babies ultimately flew away from the nest. On the 14th day onwards we observed that the nest was abandoned and ultimately weathered.

This was altogether a different experience and a lifetime journey with the little bird in family building. What was unique and attracted us most was during incubation and baby-sitting the male bird was feeding the female. That was a rare observation!

Here I am sharing some shots chronologically for the viewers to get a glimpse of the Indian Paradise Flycatcher baby-sitting.



Sibananda, being a devoted lover of nature and a wildlife explorer, cherishes his time mingling amongst the local flora and fauna. As a senior executive of a PSU Bank he is currently posted at Durgapur.



1ST BIRD WALK BY BWS *Pampa Mistri*

পাখি দেখা, প্রকৃতিকে চেনাজানা, ঘাস-বুনোফুল-প্রজাপতি-মথ-পোকাদের সাথে কিছুটা পথ চলা ছোটদের খুব দ্রুত আনন্দ দেয় আর প্রকৃতির কাছাকাছিও নিয়ে আসে। ছোট থেকেই প্রকৃতিকে ভালোবাসাতে, সচেতন করতে পারলে আশ্চর্যে লাভ আমাদের সবার। এই ভাবনা থেকেই গত ১২ ডিসেম্বর ২০২১, রবিবার সকালে পূর্ব কোলকাতা জলাভূমি অঞ্চলের বাচ্চাদের (East Kolkata Wetland Children) নিয়ে সংগঠিত হয় BWS-এর প্রথম “বার্ড ওয়াক” তথা অভিজ্ঞ, পাখি-বিষয়ক জ্ঞান সম্পন্ন, বোদ্ধা মানুষের সাথে পাখি দেখা।

BWS -এর তরফে ফিল্ডস্কোপ আর দূরবীনসহ সেক্রেটারি সূজন চ্যাটার্জী ও ট্রেজারার মেজর পরিহারসহ আমরা ১৬জন, Disappearing Dialogues NGO-র তরফে ৫জন, খিয়াদহ ও বামনঘাটা স্কুল থেকে ১০জন পড়ুয়া সকাল সাতটায় মিলিত হলাম নলবন ভেড়ির সেক্টর ফাইভ গেটের সামনে।

এই প্রথম এই রকম বেড়িয়ে পড়া, তার সাথে আবার ‘পাখি দেখা’ — স্বভাবতই বাচ্চারা ছিলো ভীষণ উদ্দীপ্ত এবং আবেগপ্রবণ !! প্রাথমিক পরিচয় আদান-প্রদানের পর বাচ্চাদের লেখা কবিতা পাঠ করা হলো :

কিচিমিচির করে ডাকে
রঙ বাহারী পাখি
স্নেহে তার ভরিয়ে রাখে
বাচ্চাদেরকে বাসায় ডাকে ॥
প্রিয়া বর্মণ

নীল আকাশের আবাবিল,
মাটির ছোঁয়া মন ।
হৃদয় ভরা স্বপ্ন দিয়ে,
গৃহে নতুন জাগরণ ॥

কালো রঙে দেহ মোরা
দেখতে খুবই সুন্দর ।
অপূর্ব তার মাতৃস্নেহ
পাই না দেখতে সবাই ।

সস্তিকা

১) মেঠো আবাবিলের সৃষ্টি
বাসাটি দেখতে ভারি মিষ্টি
তার মধ্যে দিচ্ছে উঁকি ছানারা
মা পাখি দেয় পাহারা ॥

২) সবুজ বনের ছোট পাখি
অপূর্ব তার ডাকাডাকি
ছানাদের সে ভালোবেসে
মাতৃস্নেহে ভরিয়ে রাখে ॥

নিবেদিতা নস্কর

লাল সাদা কালো, দেখতে রঙের পাখি,
মেঠো আবাবিল, বলে তাদের ডাকি,
কিচিমিচ শব্দে ডাকে
ছোট মিষ্টি মেঠো আবাবিল পাখি ।

রূপসা মন্ডল ।

কবিতার মাধ্যমে বাচ্চাদের মনের আনন্দের এক সুন্দর বহিঃপ্রকাশ ঘটলো। তারপর আমরা চললাম পাখি দেখতে নলবনের ভিতরে।

দুধারে খোলা জলাশয়, তারমধ্যে পরিযায়ী হাঁস, কচুরিপানার ফাঁকে ফাঁকে ছোট ছোট পাখিদের লুকোচুরি, চেনা বকেদেরও নানা নাম, আগে না দেখা নতুন অচেনা পাখি দেখা, ফিল্ডস্কোপে বা বাইনোকুলারে চোখ লাগিয়ে পাখিদের প্রায় হাতে ধরে



দেখার মতো করে দেখতে পাওয়া, পাখি বিষয়ে নানান তথ্য, গল্প শোনা — সব মিলিয়ে প্রায় তিন ঘন্টা সময় কেটে গেলো ছশ করে !!

পাখি দেখার শেষে বাচ্চাদের সাথে কথোপকথনের সময় আনন্দে ভরপুর, খুশিতে উচ্ছ্বসিত সব বাচ্চারই এক কথা — “আমরা দারুণ খুশি। এইভাবে তো আমরা কখনও বের হইনি, পাখিও দেখিনি। আমাদের খুব ভাল লাগছে। আমরা এবার বাড়ির আশেপাশে পাখিদের খেয়াল করবো, দেখবো। আমরা আবার আসবো।” বাচ্চাদের সাথে সাথে আমরাও আনন্দিত যে আমরা ওদেরকে খুশি করতে পেরেছি, একটু হলেও প্রকৃতিকে দেখার আনন্দ ভাগ করে নিতে পেরেছি। এই ‘বার্ড ওয়াকে’ অংশগ্রহণকারীদের নাম নিচে দেওয়া হলোঃ



From Kheadaha School:

Priya
Rupsa
Ria
Sastika
Anwasha

From Bamanghata School:

Nayana
Nibedita
Sudeshna
Sandipa
Sathi

dD Members:

Nobina Gupta
Antara Gupta
Sreeja Basu
Shreya Dey
Sulagna Sarkar

BWS Participants:

- | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Sujan Chatterjee | 7. Bhaskarjyoti Banerjee | 13. Soumya Kundu |
| 2. Major B S Parihar | 8. Samim Akhter | 14. Apratim Kundu |
| 3. Pampa Mistri | 9. Swati Das | 15. Sudip Ghosh |
| 4. Dr. Anirban Bhaduri | 10. Meghna Banerjee | 16. Brian Lobo |
| 5. Dr. Anirban Kundu | 11. Manaswini Ghoshal | |
| 6. Sukanta Kundu | 12. Diya Banerjee | |

নিচে রইলো ঐ দিন দেখা পাখির তালিকা —

Gadwall
Tufted Duck
Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) (গোলা পায়রা)
Eurasian Collared-Dove (কণ্ঠী ঘুঘু)
Spotted Dove (ছিট / দাগী ঘুঘু)
Greater Coucal (কুবো)
Asian Palm-Swift (তাল চড়াই)
Gray-headed Swamphe (বেগুনী কালেম)
Watercock (জল-মোরগ)
White-breasted Waterhen (ডাহুক)
Common Sandpiper (কাদা খোঁচা)
Asian Openbill (শামুকখোল)
Oriental Darter (গয়ার)
Little Cormorant (ছোট পানকৌড়ী)
Great Cormorant (বড় পানকৌড়ী)
Indian Cormorant (পানকৌড়ী)

Gray Heron (ধূসর বক)
Purple Heron (লাল কাঁক)
Cattle Egret (গো-বক / গাই-বগলা)
Indian Pond-Heron (কোঁচবক)
Black-crowned Night-Heron (নিশিবক)
Shikra (শিকরা)
Black Kite (চিল)
Common Kingfisher (ফটকা মাছরাঙা)
White-throated Kingfisher (সাদা-বুক মাছরাঙা)
Green Bee-eater (বাঁশপাতি)
Black-hooded Oriole (বেনে বউ)
Black Drongo (ফিঙে)
Brown Shrike (কাজল পাখি)
Long-tailed Shrike (tricolor/longicaudatus)
(মেটে/কাজলা লাটোরা)

নোটঃ বাংলা নামের ক্ষেত্রে মূলতঃ শ্রী অজয় হোমের 'বাংলার পাখি' বইতে উল্লিখিত নাম নেওয়া হয়েছে। দু-একটি ক্ষেত্রে অন্য বই।

Papma Mistri, an avid lover of nature, trekking and travel, got involved with bird watching later in life. She loves to visit new places, and lose herself in a nice book.



BWS ANNUAL BIRDWATCHING CAMP, 2021 – PURULIA

Maj B S Parihar

“You must have the bird in your heart before you can find it in the bush.”

- John Burroughs, Birds and Bees, Sharp Eyes and Other Papers

It had all along been an idea at the back of our minds to conduct an Annual Birdwatching Camp, where members could pursue their passion for birdwatching and engage in meaningful ‘adda’ to hone their skills. Sometime around Durga Puja 2021, Sujan called up to discuss the idea in detail. We soon narrowed down our search to Ayodhya Hills in Purulia district, primarily because the area has not been fully explored and the habitat promises a chance to see many uncommon birds.

After careful research, Bon Polashi Eco Huts was chosen as the preferred accommodation for the camp. Set along the northern edge of Ayodhya Hills and nestled along the serene waters of Murguma Dam, Bon Polashi Eco Huts promised all that we were looking for in our Annual Camp; cozy accommodation, picturesque setting, delectable local cuisine and walking trails through woods and hills. We booked the accommodation for 3 Nights – 4 Days (16-19 December 2021).

Meanwhile, applications for joining the camp started pouring in as soon as the announcement was made. We had to stop the count at 19 participants, keeping logistics in mind. A 24 seater Tempo Traveler Bus was also booked so that all participants could travel safely and comfortably to the camp site.

On 16 December 2021, the 1st BWS Annual Birdwatching Camp commenced, with the bus picking up participants from pre-decided locations; City Centre – 1, Susrut Hospital, Police Training School, Dankuni Crossing and Durgapur Muchipara. Senior member Mrs. Pampa Mistri had bought some baked goodies, which we had for breakfast, astride the Durgapur Expressway. A tea/pee break was taken at Shaktigarh. On resumption of the journey, we exited the Expressway at Durgapur Muchipara, where we picked up two members and proceeded towards Bankura – Purulia. We reached Purulia at around 1:30 pm and hunger was palpable inside the bus. Another 14 Kms south of Purulia town, lies a quaint dhaba called Ruchika, where we had a rather late lunch at 3:00 pm. It is often said, when a Bengali stomach is full, the journey gets easier. While half the bus went on an afternoon siesta, we charted our course to Murguma Dam on narrow-winding village roads, as advised by the Bon Polashi Management. Google Maps are of limited help in such terrain and it is advisable to follow the directions given by someone who has travelled on those roads.

We reached Bon Polashi just before sunset and were ushered into our rooms/tents by the helpful staff.

The setting Sun, beyond the calm waters of Murguma Dam, was inviting us to start enjoying the picturesque views right away. Binoculars were brought out in a jiffy and soon we were enjoying the lovely view of the reservoir with Little Grebes and Red-crested Pochards in our viewfinders. Tens and hundreds of Green Bee-eaters hovered above us to catch insects. When the light faded away, we came back to the camp to enjoy the 'Muri and Tele-bhaja' snack, amidst cheerful banter. The participants seemed to be getting into the mood for the excitement which was to follow. At around 7:00 pm, we left the camp on foot, armed with torches, headlamps, cameras and binoculars to look for Nightjars and Owls. No sooner had we reached the foot of a nearby hillock, we sighted an Indian Nightjar perched on the ground. We approached the bird carefully and it gave us ample of opportunities for photographs. Meanwhile, another Nightjar flew by and was identified as the Savanna Nightjar. Meanwhile, a few young members decided to climb the rocky hillock from one side. Within ten minutes, they sent back word that the call of the Rock Eagle-Owl had been heard, generating a lot of excitement among the participants. Along the embankment, a family of Jackals was heard and seen, under torch lights, at a distance. The night birding party returned to the camp, full of zealous energy. The prospect of sighting the Rock Eagle-Owl next morning, looked bright. Dinner was served at the Camp Dining Hall and we dug into the sumptuous yet homely fare before retiring to our allotted rooms.

Checklists 16.12.2021 :

1. Murguma Dam - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156961>
2. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99158257>

17 December 2021 : The day started early, with a 6:00 am departure from the camp, on foot. We reached the base of the rocky hillock, divided ourselves into two groups to look for the Rock Eagle-Owl. Within minutes, four Owls were spotted. While three flew east and sat on a tree, one flew west and perched on a rocky ledge, under the grass. Spotter scopes, binoculars and cameras pointing towards the owls, we waited for the golden light. Majestic and resplendent in all their glory, the Owls were a sight to behold. The Owls on the eastern rock face were wary of our presence but we did get a few good shots. The one on the western rock face remained on its perch for the whole day. Other birds seen on the morning were duly identified, photographed and recorded in our eBird checklist.

We returned to the camp for breakfast, brimming with pride. We had successfully tracked and spotted the most sought-after species in that area. Post breakfast, the group split into 2-3 small groups and went birding again, while some of us stayed back at the camp for a leisurely hot water bath. The post-breakfast sojourn must have been good because the lunch table was ripe with stories from all groups. After the post-lunch customary forty winks, we were back to business again, as we explored another hillock right across the camp. This patch produced a variety of birds, which were duly identified, photographed and recorded in our eBird checklist. The day ended with some celestial star gazing through our spotter scopes. We were able to see Jupiter with all its four moons and Saturn with its rings, among other stars and constellations.

Checklists 17.12.2021 :

1. Murguma Hillock - <https://ebird.org/india/checklist/S99158285>
2. Murguma Dam - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156955>
3. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156955>
4. Murguma Dam - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156955>
5. Murguma Dam - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156939>
6. Murguma Dam - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156927>

18 December 2021 : Today, we decided to take the bus atop Ayodhya Hills. We reached the top of the hillock after a brief drive on narrow-winding roads and disembarked. We decided to walk back to the base of the hill and asked the driver to meet us there. We were immediately greeted by a Golden-fronted Leafbird. Soon, many species began to emerge from the forest as we slowly made our way towards the base of the hillock. The serene silence, broken only by the occasional chirping of the birds, kept us company throughout. Several notable species were observed, identified, photographed and recorded in our eBird checklist.

On our return to the camp, a breakfast of Luchi, AlooTarkari, Dim (Eggs) and Rossogolla was served and had with immense gratitude. It was decided that post-lunch, we will head further into the hills to explore virgin territory. Thus the morning session, after breakfast, was kept free. While some took rest and others went searching for birds again, Dr. Anirban Bhaduri decided to head towards the hills on a rented bicycle along with two of the youngest birdwatchers, Torsa Chatterjee and Arushi Bhaduri. It was only when they returned late for lunch that we came to know of their escapade. While they did have fun along the waterfall, the chain of the bicycle came off when they were farthest from the camp. The rich (in experience) youngsters and the poor (in energy levels) doctor, came back huffing and puffing, with the broken down bicycle. The lunch was had, listening to the animated doctor narrating his woes.

We boarded the bus again, after lunch and headed towards Ayodhya Hills. Somewhere, on a nondescript location, we stopped the bus to take a look at the surroundings. We veered away from the road and walked along a pugdundee up to the forest's edge. Several species were sighted including the Jerdon's Leafbird. Just before sunset, the call of the Jungle Owlet was heard, sending the entire party scampering to look for it. Soon, the owlet was sighted and the arduous task of showing the bird to all began. It soon became evident that there were two Jungle Owlets there. A lot of time was spent observing and photographing these owlets. Meanwhile, some men and children from the nearby village had gathered to witness the spectacle of city dwellers watching birds. We introduced ourselves to the village folk and had a lovely few minutes answering to their curious queries.

As the sun set, we returned to the camp for the evening snack of 'Muri and Tele-bhaja'. Here, serious discussions were held on topics ranging from Map Reading & Navigation, how to take care of optical equipment and the effects of climate change on birds and their conservation/extinction. Most queries were answered by our in-house experts for the benefit of all. Since, it was to be our last night at the camp, we decided to have a camp fire, which the Bon Polashi folks were happy to organize. As the flames began to rise from the camp fire, we witnessed the making of Bamboo Chicken by the chef of Bon Polashi.

Chicken pieces, marinated in rustic herbs and spices, are stuffed inside a 2 feet long, hollow bamboo piece and sealed with aromatic leaves. These bamboo pieces are put in the camp fire to roast for one hour or till the juices from inside the bamboo cease to flow out. The end result is unique and satisfies all the sensory organs. BWS campers polished off the Bamboo Chicken servings in no time at all. The dinner table was abuzz with memories of the trip, lifers, sightings and lessons learnt.

Checklists 18.12.2021 :

1. Murguma Hill, Gajraidi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156921>
2. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99157040>
3. Karaidihi Bamni - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156899>
4. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99158189>

19 December 2021 : On the last day of the camp, we headed westwards from Bon Polashi to look for the Jerdon's Bushlark. The trek led us through fields, a rivulet and a forest. We did sight the bird but photographs were hard to come by. The Jungle Owlet was spotted again and the elusive Grey Francolin was heard calling. After two hours of walk through undulating terrain, we returned to the camp to pack our bags. Bon Polashi had organized brunch on our request. Post-brunch, we settled our dues with the resort. An impromptu prize giving ceremony was organized and chocolates were given to various participants for their enthusiastic participation and contribution during the camp.

Checklists 19.12.2021 :

1. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99158189>
2. Baradi - <https://ebird.org/checklist/S99156674>

The bus departed from Bon Polashi at 10:30 am, as we headed home, full of photographs and memories from the camp. The mood was somber and reflective of the experience that had enriched one and all. Soulful music playing on the Bluetooth enabled stereo system inside the bus, we charted our course towards Kolkata. Stopping for a quick snack at Shaktigarh, we reached Kolkata around 9:30 pm after dropping participants along the route. A supremely successful 1st BWS Annual Birdwatching Camp culminated on a high note, with ample encouragement to plan for the next camp.

Participants :

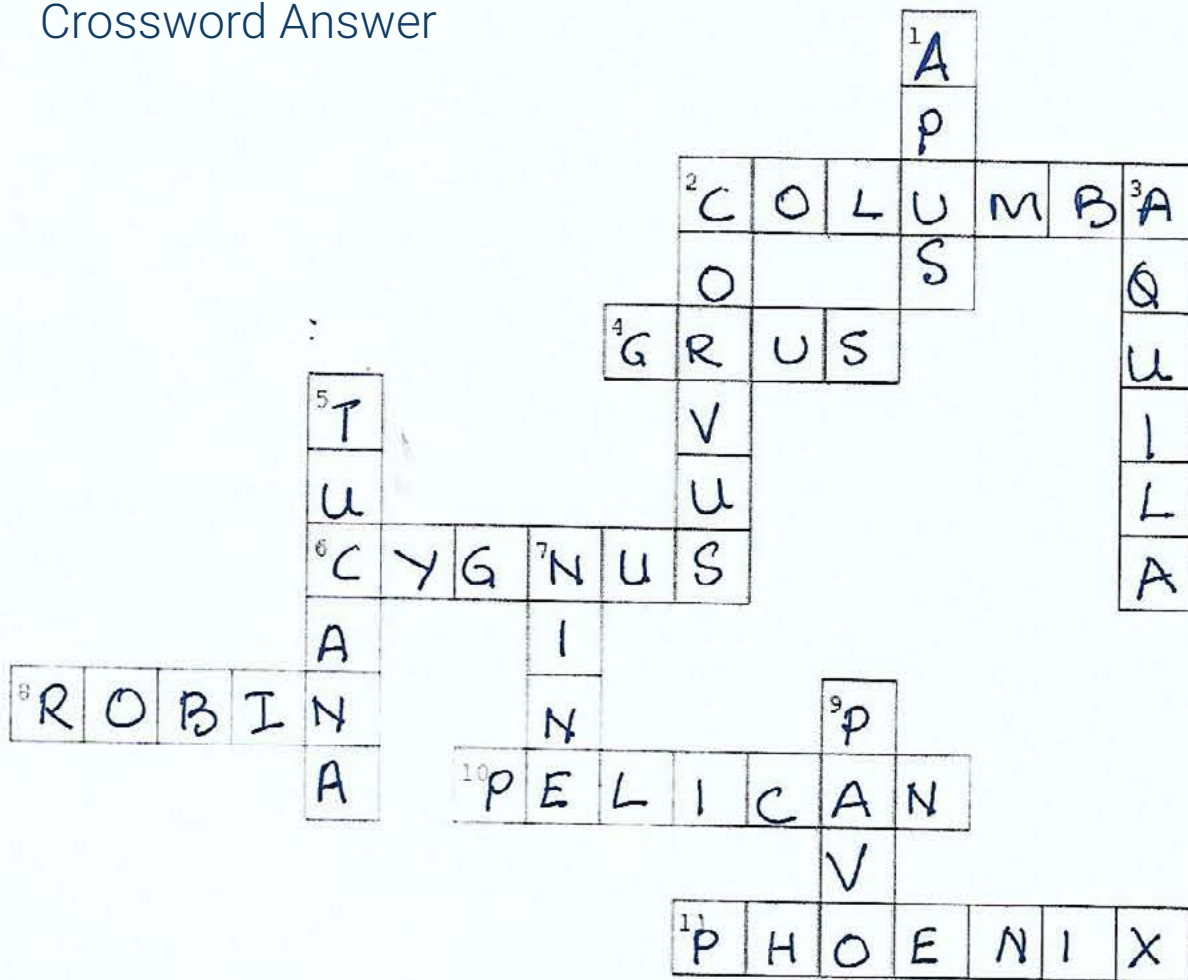
- | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Sujan Chatterjee | 8. Dr. Anirban Bhaduri | 14. Sukanta Kundu |
| 2. Torsa Chatterjee | 9. Arushi Bhaduri | 15. Sourav Halder |
| 3. Pampa Mistri | 10. Sudip Ghosh | 16. Sankha Misra |
| 4. Madhumita Bishnu | 11. Bhaskarjyoti Banerjee | 17. Priyam Chattopadhyay |
| 5. Batul Pipewala | 12. Suman Dasgupta | 18. Saikat Adhurya |
| 6. Aindrila Sarkar | 13. Suman Das | 19. Maj B S Parihar |
| 7. Tapasi Mukherjee | | |

"Birds will give you a window, if you allow them. They will show you the secrets from another world – fresh vision that, though it is avian, can accompany you home and alter your life. They will do this for you even if you don't know their names – though such knowing is a thoughtful gesture. They will do this for you if you watch them."

- Lyanda Lynn Haupt, Rare Encounters with Ordinary Birds

Maj B S Parihar lives in Kolkata, an all-rounder with diverse interests. An Army veteran and currently the CEO of an automobile company. An active birder and motor rallyist.

Crossword Answer



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