

NEWSLETTER

Vol. 2 | Issue No. 1 | July-September 2022



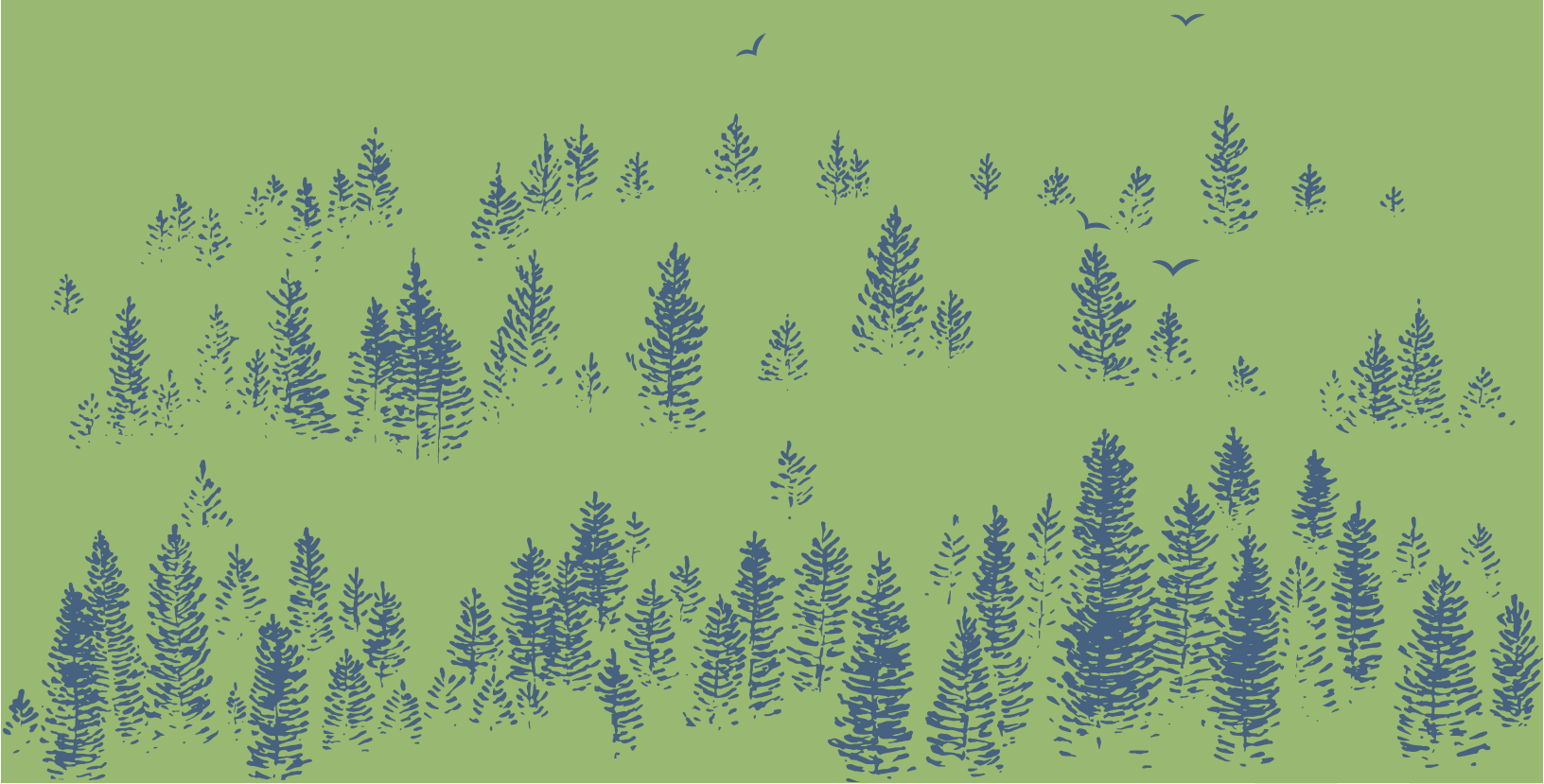
FAN TAIL

BIRDWATCHERS' SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Vol. 2 | Issue No.1 | July-Sept 2022



*“To make a prairie it takes
a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee, And revery.
The revery alone will do, If bees are few. ”*
—Emily Dickinson



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.

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*1st Annual Birdwatching Camp
at Muruguma, Purulia
16-19 December 2021*

EDITORIAL

Hello Birders,

With this Issue - 1 of Volume - 2, we achieved a milestone.

It's been a year of Fantail – the BWS publication!

First, we sincerely thank all the readers, contributors, and Birdwatchers' Society's editorial team. This journey started with a cryptic message from Major BS Parihar, aptly echoed and supported by Sujan, Kanad, Biswapriya and many birders whom we never knew or had ever met. While the beginning was a tad shaky, that never deterred the cause. Instead, the momentum continued unabated.

With umpteen learnings and dauntless zeal, we commence a new cycle and a new publication volume and hopefully get better at it. One of our stated objectives this time is to reduce the overall pages and make them easier to manage and read. Do let us know what you think of it.

We have kept this issue quite general and, unlike the previous publications, have decided to go without a specific theme. Habitat conservation being high on our priority, it is a pleasure to present Arka Sarkar's article on the impact of makhana cultivation on birds and bio-diversity in

wetlands of central Bengal. Nest building for birds is an annual feature, much like our anniversary. In this issue, Dr Sukanya Datta presents strategies of Birds' Nests in her article. In his inimitable style, forester, Arijit Banerjee, talks about the successful rewinding of an urban landscape, a wonderful initiative. Birders Sudipto, Srijan, Urvashi and Amitava speak about their experiences on birding trips. For the bird quiz aficionado, we have our crossword in addition to our regular cartoon section. Srijan Roy Choudhury's article expresses the emotional desperation of a lonely bird longing for its partner at the peak of the breeding season. Through the discourse Srijan describes the habitat, and other sightings of the day. Pretty nice and unique storytelling.

We hope you enjoy this issue and inspire others to join the fraternity. Most importantly, please continue to share your feedback by writing to us. We hope you continue to support us in our mission.

Wishing you all a new season of 'Happy & responsible birding'. We look forward to hearing about your updates, stories, and avian adventures.

Fantail Editorial Team
Birdwatchers' Society



MAKHANA: A MULTI-HEADED MONSTER IN RICH WETLANDS

ARKA SARKAR

“There are no birds”, said one of the fisherman, “None at all now. Earlier there would be thousands. Yes, maybe even ten thousand.”

“And no fish. Absolutely no life.” said another fisherman “All dead because of the poison. Besides, even if there were fish, they won’t let us go anywhere near the lake”

“The poison is the worst. We’re all falling sick”, said a third.

We were in rural Murshidabad, in the verdant floodplains of central West Bengal, next to a large waterbody. We sat inside a village house with a thatched roof, with about twenty marginal fishermen. We listened with dismay about an environmental catastrophe caused by something that no one here had experienced till a few months back. The cultivation of Makhana (*Euryale ferox*) was unknown here. Within a few months, this cultivation has taken over a large wetland called Bilkarul Beel , poisoned its water, finished off all its biodiversity,

and destroyed the livelihood of hundreds of fishermen who depended on it. The cultivation was about to spread to all large waterbodies of the region, threatening an environmental and socio economic disaster at a scale that is seldom seen. As members of an NGO named Human and Environment Alliance League (HEAL), which works with conservation of habitats and species in West Bengal, we had an uphill task.



State of the Beel in 2021 January

MAKHANA AT BILKARUL BEEL : A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PROBLEM

Bilkarul Beel (Beel = large body of water) in Murshidabad district, central West Bengal, is a large wetland, seasonally connected with a channel of Bhagirathi. It supports significant biodiversity, including important species like Fishing Cats and Otters which are a part of Schedule I of Wildlife Protection Act (1972). It is a repository of threatened indigenous fishes, which are fast depleting across the region. It hosts large number of birds, including some 5-10 thousand migratory ducks in winter. About 600-700 families of fishermen, living in three villages around the wetland, depend on it as their sole source of livelihood. Farmers around the beel use the water for irrigation.

From mid-2021, illegal cultivation of Makhana (*Euryale ferox*) started in Bilkarul beel. It was headed and funded by some traders, who were not locals, and who managed to get some influential individuals and the local Panchayat on their side. Makhana cultivation is a lucrative activity economically. There is much marketing aimed at making Makhana popular as a health food and a packaged snack. Demand is growing. Large swaths of

wetlands of Bihar are covered with Makhana plants. But it was a novel practice here in Murshidabad, in Gangetic West Bengal, where it is at odds with the fish dependent economy and the large fishermen community around wetlands. Cultivation of Makhana in Bilkarul Beel had a number of serious consequences – environmental and socio economic. The main concerns are:

1. Makhana cultivation requires heavy use of chemical weedicide, fertilizers and other agrochemicals. This kills fish and all other aquatic life, affects biodiversity and makes the water quality unsuitable for any human or animal use. Interviews reveal that most of the fish died right after the cultivation started. Locals developed health problems – particularly skin ailments. The entire effluent ran off periodically in Bhagirathi which in monsoon is connected with the wetland.
2. The Makhana plants covered much of the surface of the water, preventing sunlight from entering, and reducing dissolved oxygen. This drastically reduced most life underwater. Fish population died off. Traditional fishermen, who survived on the catch of native fish, suddenly found themselves deprived of their main source of income, and considered migrating elsewhere.
3. Both the pollution caused by the chemicals and the plants covering the surface of water made the waterbody entirely unsuitable for waterbirds – particularly the wintering population of birds.
4. Bilkarul beel is surrounded by agricultural fields. Past experience shows that paddyfields near wetlands with Makhana cultivation are toxicated due to leaching of the harmful chemicals, and gradually become unsuitable for agriculture. This leads to loss of livelihood for the entire community around the wetland – not just the fishermen.

To sum up, people lost livelihood and fell sick, there was tremendous loss of biodiversity, and the habitat of waterbirds was taken away. In brief, it was an environmental and socio economic catastrophe.

These very same consequences were documented earlier in a study by Jadavpur University across various wetlands in Malda district from 2003-2005, where Makhana cultivation was briefly attempted. Eventually the fisheries department in Malda passed orders to stop the cultivation in 2005 after an outcry by locals – particularly the fishermen. But here, the cultivators ensured support from more influential quarters who pushed the cultivation inspite of entire villages losing their livelihood.

The cultivators of Makhana are outsiders, who got hold of this wetland through money and muscle, and have no legal rights there. Official communication shows that the local Gram Panchayat issued an illegal permit for this cultivation, even though the wetland was leased to a fishermen's cooperative for fishing alone. There are signs of the practice of this cultivation spreading to other wetlands of Murshidabad and Malda district, most importantly a nearby Important Bird Area (IBA) called Ahiron Beel.

THE BATTLE STARTS : FIRST FEW STEPS

We, members of HEAL, visited the location in early September, 2021, assessed the situation, took aerial photographs, interviewed locals in groups, and thus understood the extent of the problem. This was a unique opportunity to tie conservation with the interest of the people living around the habitat. The fishermen's goals were totally aligned with the goals of conservation of the wetland habitat and biodiversity – which required ending the cultivation of Makhana. We interacted with more than a hundred fishermen from three villages surrounding the wetland and all were strongly against the destruction of the habitat. It is rare to find such a synthesis of biodiversity conservation and prevention of loss of livelihood.

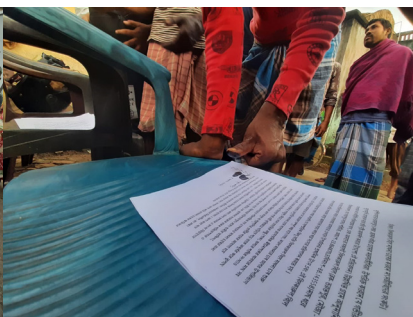
We ran a mass signature campaign, where we managed to get signature of a large number of fishermen families from 3 villages within a day. Armed with this and other data, we visited the offices of district administration and fisheries with a petition to stop this illegal and environmentally degrading practice. Forest Department was also informed about the situation. The hearsay was that the Makhana cultivators had support from influential quarters, and nothing would be done. But we kept our hopes alive.



September 2021- interacting with affected fishermen



September 2021- Signature campaign



September 2021- Signature campaign

SOME SUCCESS AFTER A LONG BATTLE

Nothing happened for a while. We informed another Kolkata based NGO called PUBLIC, who knocked a number of people higher up in administration. Then slowly, we started seeing some movement. The office of DM, Murshidabad, and the office of Assistant Director of Fisheries, Murshidabad requested the local officials to investigate. It was found that said cultivation was carried out illegally under the protection of local Gram Panchayat. The Panchayat was directed to immediately clear up the waterbody on 9th October 2021. The cultivation continued for at least one month after that, during which the crop was harvested. However, after the first harvest was complete and the first set of plants died (the plants are seasonal), the beel was left untouched for a couple of months from mid-November. During this time a good number of waterfowl landed there and the biodiversity seemed to be inching back. We conducted a waterbird census on 2nd February, 2022 with the Forest Department and counted more than 3600 waterfowl, most of which were migratory. This included 2500 Garganeys, which is the highest number of this species in West Bengal.

However, Makhana cultivation had again resumed from mid-January. Seeds were spread and fresh shoots were coming up – both from the new seeds and from the older plants which were never uprooted. After receiving reports of the recurrence, the administration again directed the Gram Panchayat to “arrange for hundred percent cleaning of remainings of illegal cultivation leading to environmental hazards”. Yet, despite such clear directions, the illegal and environmentally degrading practice carried on. No plant was removed by the Panchayat. The wetland was not cleaned of this monster.

Finally, tired of inaction, we decided to get together a team of volunteers from among the local fishermen to remove the plants. The clean-up activity began in early February, 2022. Our volunteers were threatened and abused. But we managed to remove large quantities of Makhana plants in the presence of police and administrative officials.

THE BATTLE CONTINUES

The clean-up is a long process and needs to be repeated periodically, since the plants don't perish unless totally uprooted. The cultivators also spread the seeds repeatedly since it is impossible to monitor the wetland round the clock. In mid-2022 it was reported again that the wetland had significant area under illegal Makhana cultivation. We are presently in the





process of again appealing to the administration to provide protection to our volunteers for another round of clean-up. We are likely to face resistance from outlaws employed by the traders while trying to remove the plants.

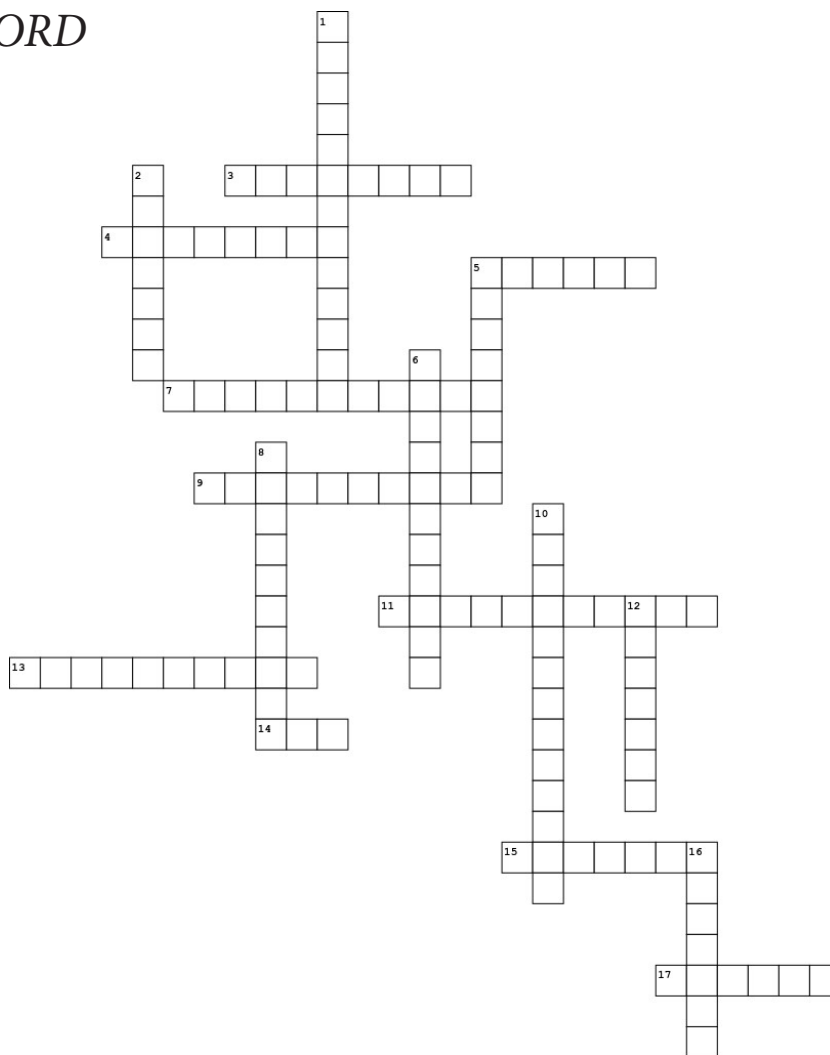
Even if this one wetland is cleaned up, there are strong chances that Makhana cultivation will recur in other wetlands in this region. It is a profitable enterprise, and there is no dearth of capital ready to be invested in it. But it is ultimately the importance of these wetlands in Gangetic West Bengal as major hubs of fish production that stands in the way of Makhana taking over and destroying all biodiversity – a rare unification of conservation and livelihood goals.

Makhana cultivation must be stopped in all natural wetlands which harbour significant biodiversity. We hope that these events at Bilkarul Beel would dissuade future cultivation of Makhana in similar wetlands. We will have to continue with our vigilance and monitoring in the region to prevent this environmentally degrading practice from spreading to other wetlands.



Arka Sarkar, a software programmer, and birdwatcher with special expertise in respect of birds of North-East India, has been part of bird surveys and various avian conservation initiatives. Arka is a state level reviewer for eBird from West Bengal and a wildlife campaigner who engages with indigenous communities to create awareness about wildlife. He is also the President of HEAL (Human & Environment Alliance League).

CROSSWORD



Across

- 3. This bird has a musical instrument in its name
- 4. Two hornbill species *Tockus deckeni* and *T. Flavirostris* hunt alongside this mammal
- 5. National Bird of Israel
- 7. State Bird of Tamil Nadu. Has a gem of a name
- 9. This bird is not at all welcoming
- 11. John Keats wrote an Ode to this bird
- 13. Sad prefix to the name
- 14. Sombre prefix to the name
- 15. Darwin studied these birds
- 17. Collective noun for Crows

Down

- 1. In 1990, the egg of this species hatched on space-station Mir making it the first bird to be born in space
- 2. This bird enters the mouth of the Nile Crocodile fearlessly
- 5. Hornbill is an example to those who ride two-wheelers
- 6. Title of a Pulitzer Prize winning book by Harper Lee
- 8. Collective noun for owls
- 10. Fear of birds
- 12. One of Hawaii's most endangered native birds has an asteroid named after it; thanks to initiative by an Indian
- 16. Classic by Richard Bach has this bird in its title

BIRD NESTS

DR SUKANYA DATTA

The picture of a bird incubating its eggs in a nest made of assorted twigs is a pretty iconic one. The Baya Weaverbird of course weaves a top-notch nest that looks somewhat like a snake charmer's flute. The nests of these birds have an impeccably neat finish; not one twig is out of place. Suspended from the branches of tall trees, the nests are made entirely out of strips of grass. Inaccessibility is the key to these structures. The nest dangles in the air and swings in the breeze. However, it remains tantalizingly out of reach. There is no debating that the weaver bird is an expert craftsman but then, the male birds have little choice but to be exceptionally good at building the nest. This is because it is only when the nest passes the extremely stringent standards of the female that the pair may breed.

However, not all bird-nests conform to these well-known designs. Some nests may not be nests at all but just carefully-tended incubation mounds.

Take the chicken-sized Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*) for example. Their incubation mounds can reach huge dimensions and weigh up to 300 tonnes. The Malleefowl buries moist litter such as leaves, sticks and bark in the centre of the mound. Incubation mounds



Weaver bird's nest

are maintained at temperatures between 32-34 °C. The male bird uses its tongue as a thermometer to keep track of the mound's temperature. Initially, the heat for incubation of the eggs is provided by microbial decomposition of the litter. Later on, solar heat also plays a part.

The Australian Brushturkey (*Alectura lathami*) buries its eggs in mounds of decomposing organic matter too. The layer of sticks placed on top of the mound traps air on the surface and acts as an insulator. The male bird uses heat sensors inside the upper bill as a thermometer. If the mound is too hot, some vegetation is removed so that the extra heat can escape. If the mound is too cold, more vegetation is added to prevent heat escape and improve insulation.

Insulation is important for hatching and the Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*) uses feathers to control nest-temperature. The inside of its nest is plastered with thousands of feathers, each collected individually! Reportedly, the Long-tailed Tit can estimate the number of feathers needed to maintain optimum incubation temperature inside its comfy nest.



Long Tailed Tit Nest

Sticks and Stones

Twigs are pretty common building materials for avian nests. But, stones? Unlikely as it sounds, birds use stones too. Rock Wrens (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) augment their nests with a pavement of stones, collected at considerable energy cost. It is believed that these stones significantly decrease water infiltration into the nests when it rains. Additionally, the stone patio also serves as an early warning system by amplifying the footfalls of the predator. Such alarms have survival value for the birds.

The nest of the Black Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucura*) has a stone platform about 10-15 cm wide. It is made up of individually collected pebbles. Each stone weighs between 3.4-8.2 g. This tiny, 35-gram bird transports on average, 3.1 kg of stones per nesting season! This is why the Black Wheatear is called Pedrero (*stone-mason*) in Spanish.

If the stones are removed, the male Black Wheatear works overtime on its stone-ferrying rate. If stones are added to the pile, it slows down the rate. Obviously, there is some avian logic at work here! It was initially supposed that the females studied the males' stone carrying ability as an index of its fitness. Unfortunately, this hypothesis, does not explain why sometimes the females also carry stones. Intriguingly, when a large number of stones is carried by the male, the female lays eggs earlier, the clutch size is larger and the hatchlings fledge sooner. The connection (if there is one) remains elusive.

Spider-silk: Stretchy and Strong

Stones are hard; spider silk is wispy and delicate. Birds incorporate it into their nests because it is lightweight, sticky, strong and flexible. It allows the nest to conform closely to the parent bird's body during incubation. This close fit minimizes space between the bird and the eggs; reducing heat loss during incubation.

The Common Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*) gets its name because of its stitching skills. The 'thread' used is usually spider silk or silk extracted from insect cocoons. It uses its pointed beak to drive the thread through the leaf. Then it grasps the thread from the other side and drives it back in the reverse direction. It teases out the ends to form knots like the heads of rivets. Sometimes it arranges the leaves to form an arch over the nest to provide umbrella-like protection to the nest.

Camouflage Strategy

Camouflage may spell the difference between life and death for the chicks. Bird-nests incorporate this in many different ways. Oftentimes spider-silk is used as a strategic material. Hodgson's Frogmouth (*Batrachostomus hodgsoni*) makes tiny cup-like nest using



Tailorbird nest

down feathers, cobwebs mosses and lichens. The birds press down the feathers against the irregularities of the bark of the chosen branch. Copious amounts of cobwebs are used to plaster the shed feathers to the branch. Bits of moss and lichens are arranged such that it becomes difficult to tell where the branch is and where the nest is!

The Long-tailed Hermit Hummingbird (*Phaethornis superciliosus*) is a fabulous engineer. It uses a leaf as a roof for its nest. To accomplish such an engineering marvel, it chooses a broad leaf growing from a low horizontal branch. The female bird hovers in the air and wraps a bit of sticky spider silk on the leaf tip. Then it uses bits of vegetation to make a shelf that projects out from the inner side of the leaf tip. It sits on this shelf and completes the compact cone-shaped nest. The nest is lined with soft plant fibres, hair, fur and feathers. A 'tail' of dead leaves is attached to the underside of the nest to disguise it. Copious use of spider silk strengthens and makes the nest stretchable.

The Bleating Warbler (*Camaroptera brevicaudata*) attaches its nest to the under-surface of a leaf, using spider-silk rivets. It sews together living leaves to make the outside of the nest and lines the inside with fine plant material. The leaves remain attached to the plant, and stay fresh and green. The Golden-headed Cisticola (*Cisticola exilis*) too builds a beautifully woven, rounded nest with a large side entrance near the top. It makes holes around the edges of large green leaves and threads the spider-silk through these holes to neatly attach



Red faced Spinetail Nest

the leaves to the outside surface of the nest. The leaves are not detached from the plant, so these provide excellent green camouflage over time; growing as the plant grows.

The Red-faced Spinetail (*Cranioleuca erythrops*) places bits of leaves and grass both above and below the nest chamber so that the outline of the nest is broken up. At a glance, the nest looks like a pile of random debris without any underlying structure and predators are fooled.

The nest of the Wren-tit (*Chamaea fasciata*) is made up of bark fibres held together with cobwebs and firmly attached to a forked branch. It first weaves a saucer-shaped network of cobwebs between the twigs to form the foundation. It then criss-crosses strands of the web going from twig to twig till it finally builds a platform of considerable thickness. It collects bits of crumbling bark from tree trunks when the platform is about 2-3 cm thick. It liberally sprinkles bits of bark on the rim of the nest and firmly anchors these with copious amounts of sticky cobweb. Then, it lines the inside of the nest with soft grass. Once the nest bowl is complete, the bird sticks bits of lichens on the outside; which helps camouflage it.

The Acadian Flycatcher (*Empidonax virescens*) builds hammock-like nests made of plant stems and fibres tied together with stalks of grass and spider silk. It disguises the nests by hanging plant debris from the nest. These are called "nest tails." Hanging plant debris from the nest is surprisingly good camouflage.

The Sooty-capped Hermit Hummingbird (*Phaethornis augusti*) suspends its nest from the lower part of a broad leaf using a rope of spider silk. It sticks green moss on the outside of the nest for camouflage and lines the inside with soft material. It incorporates spider silk into the nest to make it flexible. It prevents the nests from being blown over by using counterbalances in the form of mud pellets or pebbles which dangle below the nests. Its nest also incorporates tails made of grass and cobwebs.

Comfort and Stability

Some birds go out of their way to design 5-star nests because a nest is home for the chicks and should be comfortable. The Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) constructs a compact cup-shaped nest with four layers. The outermost layer is made of lichen, bits of bark and spider-silk. From outside the nest is perfectly camouflaged. The second layer is made of moss and grass. The third layer is made only of grass. The fourth layer is the lining made up of thin rootlets, wool and soft feathers. A lined nest is well insulated. The Chaffinch binds everything with spider silk. It uses cobwebs to make 'pads' on the branches. The nest rests on these pads. The stickiness of spider silk serves to anchor the nest firmly and give it stability.

The nest of the Long-tailed Tit is not just well-feathered but also incorporates spider-silk for adhesion to the branch. The nest is made of cobwebs and spider egg cases, hair, bits of moss and lichens; over 6000 pieces in all for a typical nest. The moss acts as hooks and the spider silk derived from spider egg-cocoons provides the loops; thus, forming a natural Velcro of sorts. The completed nest is a very stable structure that is also elastic enough to withstand a lot of stress.

The Common lora (*Aegithina tiphia*) builds an elegant nest using cobweb, fine plant roots, hair, and other soft materials. The 'finish' of the compact little nest is remarkable in that spider web is used to completely encircle the outside of the nest. This allows the nest to stretch a little as the nestlings grow.

The Latin name of the Goldcrest is *Regulus regulus*, which translates to King of Kings. This bird with a regal name builds a three-layered sophisticated nest or castle for a Kinglet. The outer layer of the cup-like nest calls for moss, small twigs, cobwebs and lichen. The middle layer uses soft and spongy moss. Finally, there is an inner layer of soft feathers and hair. Spider silk is used to suspend the nest from the branches, much like a swinging hammock. The Common Firecrest (*Regulus ignicapilla*) also builds a three layered nest. The outer layer is made of moss and lichens, compacted with spider silk. The middle layer is made with just mosses and lichens. The innermost layer is made of soft material such as feathers and hair.

Side-tracking Predators

Decoying a predator into attacking an empty nest is a good strategy to save the nestlings in the real nest. Many birds take the trouble to build a decoy nest near the one that they actually use. They even busily enter the decoy nest with building materials held firmly in their beaks and exit with all the appearance of having been busy at work. Sometimes the male rests in the decoy nest while the female incubates the eggs in the family nest. Waxbills such as the Orange-cheeked Waxbill (*Estrilda melpoda*), Common Waxbill (*Estrilda astrild*), Black-rumped Waxbill (*Estrilda troglodytes*) build just one extra decoy nest to confuse predators. The male Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), however, builds multiple dummy nests. These are called courting nests but the female lays eggs in just one of these while the male continues to build more nests. The empty nests add to the frustration of a predator as it futilely raids nest after nest. The more dummy nests that surround the actual family nest, the greater is the probability that a disappointed predator will leave the area before ever finding the nest with the chicks.

Deterrents at Work

Some birds add the dung of carnivorous animals to their nests. The strong carnivore scent emanating from the dung scares smaller predators away or perhaps lead them to believe that the nests have already been raided.

Spinetails carpet their nests with sloughed reptile skins; changing the position of these skins from time to time. The Great-crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*), Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*), Paradise Riflebird (*Ptiloris paradiseus*) and Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) dangle shed snakeskin on or around their nests. This strategy is like using the recorded bark of a dog to deter thieves!

The Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*) has a scarier ploy. It places large, hairy caterpillars of various species on the rim of its nest. The captured caterpillars cannot escape because the bird pinches them with its beak such that the caterpillars become paralyzed. Perhaps these are eaten when food is scarce or maybe these are predator-deterrents; or both.

Nest sanitation

Sanitation is an important factor because many parasites thrive in unsanitary conditions. Some birds, especially those feeding on meat, seem to go the extra mile to keep their nests hygienic...or at least sweet smelling.

The Pacific Baza (*Aviceda subcristata*) lines its nest with eucalyptus leaves which have insect-repellent properties. Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*), Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), Zone-tailed Hawk (*Buteo albonotatus*), Short-tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*), Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) and Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) also bring fresh leaves with insecticidal properties to line their nests.

All these birds are raptors and their chicks feed on carcasses. Decaying meat attracts flies. Flies are carriers of disease. So, it makes sense to keep pathogenic microbes and nasty insects at bay using aromatic plants. Additionally, fresh greenery aids in camouflage. Cavity-nesting Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*) use leaves of the Ligurian Yarrow and French Lavender to line their nests. These leaves are rich in camphor, eucalyptol, limonene, linalool, piperitenone and myrcene - compounds that inhibit the growth of bacteria, fungus, virus, and are also insect-deterrents that keep mosquitoes at bay.

The list of interesting bird nests is never ending. However, it is time to emulate the White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) that places a leafy branch on the top of its nest signalling, that like this article, its nest-building project is over.

Reference Link:

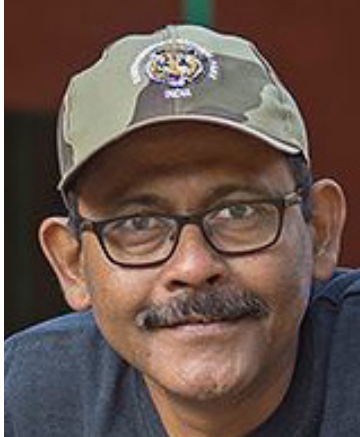
1) Nest of Long-tailed Tit:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Long Tailed Tit Nest 10-04-12 %286919194038%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Long_Tailed_Tit_Nest_10-04-12_%286919194038%29.jpg)

2) Nest of Red-faced Spinetail:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red-faced Spinetail Nest.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red-faced_Spinetail_Nest.jpg)

Dr Sukanya Datta – retired Chief Scientist with the CSIR, has over two decades of experience in the field of science communication. She is amongst the few women science fiction writers of India, with four published collections and many science books.



KISHANBAGH REWINDING URBAN OPEN SPACES

ARIJIT BANERJEE



The Gate

It's a crispy winter morning and the sun is young. As you buy your ticket you notice signage that tells you that plastic bottle and packaged munchies are a no-no and that every hour there shall be a curated walk by a naturalist. Not something that happens usually in our urban parks and gardens. As you walk up the mist-blanketed wooden pathway you notice banisters fashioned out of poles. If you look up to your left, a sleepy Spotted Owlet can be seen on the ticket house girders, giving you the stare.

Weather and geology come together to create a landscape. For millions of years, aeolian sand, the finest of them all, were blown in from the western desert and deposited at the base of the Aravalli hills leading to sand-dunes. Some of these dunes were treated by



The Pathway

the Forest Department - simple planting of *Acaia tortilis*. The rest were left alone, open to encroachment, mining; in some cases the sand was removed for infrastructure and urbanisation. Most of the area you travel inside Jhalana Leopard safari is made up of such sand.



Fossilised sand-dunes cradled by Aravallis

Flashback 2015. The fossilized sand dunes at the edge of Nahargarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Jaipur resembled dirt heaps - encroached upon and filthy - not a place to venture after dark. Jaipur Development Authority, who administers an urban park nearby reached out to Pradip Kishan, ecologist and landscape restorer for inputs on how to do up the city's gardens. Pradip was not interested in municipal gardens. At the end of a long day of looking at various open spaces, Pradip saw these old dunes and found them both interesting and an intellectual challenge.

The project took off. The area was fenced, cleaned up and development was planned with the clear aim of creating islands of habitat types from different parts of Rajasthan. Any indigenous vegetation, true to type was retained. A simple, yet at that point, unheard of intervention was to bring in soil from the desert districts and spread them in selected areas. Whatever sprouts in the rains and survives is a representative floral component! The purist forester in me was very skeptical, I confess.

By now you have reached a roundhouse. Thatched with Kheep (*Leptadenia pyrotechnica*), very ethnic, tastefully done. You get to see excellent signage explaining the area and its past. As you move ahead on the trail, you will realize that the vegetation is changing from sparse deciduous woods to scrub and grass.



Depending on the season you can expect the pink and yellow Goya Khair (Sicklebush - *Dichrostachys cineraria*) in bloom and the near phosphorescent Bui (Desert Cotton - *Aerva javanica*); Thor (*Euphorbia caducifolia*) adapted with thorns and fleshy stems to survive in the scorching heat. Its flowers are delicate pink.



Thor

An array of rock and boulders are placed off the trail with signage spelling out the history of the planet and human evolution. You realize how minuscule human existence is. Granite, quartz, fossil bearing sedimentary rocks are all interpreted lucidly. A Nilgai bull stares at you from behind the bushes as you move ahead.



Fossil bearing Limestone from Jaisalmer

A short walk brings you to a stylized pool, shallow and full of indigenous aquatic vegetation. In summer you can expect a few Bullfrogs. There are some fishes too. Probably the Nile Chichlid. The ubiquitous presence of *Oreochromis niloticus* in all inland water-bodies in India is just one indicator of how easy it is for exotics to replace indigenous life forms. The dainty flowers of wild water lilies greet the rising sun.

At the top of this dune is a long house - a traditional thatched structure with rough-hewn benches to rest your feet. Afar on one side is an urban sprawl. To the east are the imposing hills of Nahargarh, its slopes covered by Dhok (*Anogeissus pendula*) forests. In the dry season, Dhok will be leafless and purple brown. The glistening golden pods of *Acacia senegal* - Kumtha - will provide the punctuation marks on this wonderful landscape. Those hills are home to Leopards, Hyenas, Porcupines and occasionally a Sloth Bear. If you want to see a White-naped Tit or the White-bellied Minivet, those hills are the place. On the south are slums. The early morning call to prayers punctuated by birdsong doesn't really seem too discordant. A Francolin calls, a few Quails fly off disturbed.



The Longhouse

You walk ahead and down. You are in the Roee. Tall grass, scrub, Kheenp, Jaal, a solitary Khejri. Kheenp, *Leptadenia pyrotechnica* is the same bush, which is dried and used for thatching in the desert. In ancient Jerusalem, it was burned for incense. The pods are edible. Jaal, *Salvadora persica* is a small tree that houses birds and its edible fruits are a delicacy. Khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*) - the tree of life - all over the Thar and the Arabian desert, is the most precious of life forms - protein, fodder, timber - Khejri just keeps on giving. The dry grass has numerous species including *Lasiurus scindicus* - Sewan as we call it. A bushy, perennial grass that is loved by ungulates - wild as well as domesticated.



Roee

Roee, a long-established vernacular term in the north-western parts of this subcontinent, describes the inter-dunal vegetation - the 'jungle' - in Rajasthan, in the Punjab, in Sind. An incredible mix of annual plants and grasses - some perennial, some ephemeral, some lasting a few months - flowering and seeding quickly to ensure the survival of their lineage. So much folklore and parables are woven around the Roee. Try imagining wonderfully lush greenery with bursts of colourful flowers. That's monsoon in the Roee. As the season progresses, the greens become yellow and then brown, beautiful nonetheless, waiting for another monsoon. You make a mental note to come back here in August or September. You will want to see *Saccharum munja* in bloom.

By now you have climbed down a few flights of stairs to a pond. The water is crystal clear and you can see the shadows of small fish swimming around. The sedges and the water plants are growing well. Expect a Grebe or a Teal. On the nearby post sits a Black-winged Kite, its ruby eyes watching out for breakfast in the form of a Desert Jird who have colonies nearby. Overhead a Serpent Eagle tests the thermals. If you look around, expect a few Porcupine quills and a pugmark. A Leopard came to water the previous night. The habitat is such that you can expect a Desert Cat, a Desert Fox and even a Pangolin

Kishanbagh is one of India finest examples in Ecosystem restoration and rewinding. It also is a template on how an urban wilderness needs redefining - the need to move away from the colonial idea of a well laid out English Garden - and re-embracing the wilds as we in India have always known. It was first the Mughals and their code of gardens and then the British who wanted Hindustan look like the British Isles. Courtesy the colonial powers, we lost or own jungles, bagans, rooes. Our colonial masters have gone. But in our minds, we are still prisoners to definitions that are both spatially and temporally alien.



Indian Desert Jird

Another facet of landscape management is re-visiting the need to 'plant' up forestland. More often than not, just protection (read walls or fences) helps. A management regime that protects, does selective tending of rootstock and supplements habitat health through small soil and moisture conservation structures and seeding. This is cost effective and has a lesser carbon impact. It will be these landscapes that in days to come will house a lot of biodiversity. It is these places that shall count as OECMs and be accounted for against national carbon commitments.

The place is popular enough. Most visitors enjoy the interesting talks by young naturalists. For Monal and Dinkar, this is not just a job but also a calling in the true sense. Their passion is palpable. The Instagram - Tiktok crowd could be a bit less boisterous you might think, the young couples a bit restrained, but then you tell yourself, age is catching up with you.

By the time you walk back to the gate, you realize that your exercise band shows that you have exceeded your daily quota of steps. Your stomach grumbles at the thought of Kachauris and Jalebis and it leaves a hint of guilt. You give in and head to the nearest breakfast joint.

Arijit Banerjee 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.



LONELY LADY

SRIJAN ROY CHOUDHURY

You, strange-looking wingless creatures, are getting what you want because I am not getting what I want. I am sitting alone on the branch of this naked tree. Is it as lonely as I am? Standing tall, away from its kindred. It has roots deep into the mountainsides, finding rock crevasses or making some as the roots dig deep below. It searches desperately for drops of water to remain alive, to bear fruits and let its children throw up arms in the air in the joy and ecstasy of life. But look at these rocks and the other trees. They remain there for aeons, navigating the temporal river together, deriving strength and companionship from each other. So is my perch, gradually trying to join its herd. It seems that in the end, I am going to be the avian Rapunzel whose prince never arrives on wings.



The cold wind is blowing from the north. The thin, white sheets are rolling up on the hillside, trying to blanket the green canopy with whitish-grey mist. The leaves and grasses are already moist from the morning shower. The lichens on the branches are so in the mood that their green is gleaming under the overcast sun. Few Black Bubluls are scampering through the branches and leaves while a Scarlet Minivet pair keeps a close watch on their activities. A solitary pair of Himalayan Bulbul is enjoying the sudden burst of the warmth from the sun with a Short-billed Minivet, though keeping a respectable distance from each other. Two little Golden-fronted Leafbirds just wheezed past as they had left something very important in their nest. From where in the jungle is the Indian Peafowl calling from? Oh, there, my friend is flying away with her mate, and I am sitting here, telling you my story between my calls for my Knight in the shining armour. Look, the insects are coming out under the bark and crawling here and there. Get lost you creepy crawlies, I am not in the mood and I may forget my frugivore character and start feasting on you. Eating you may take my mind off the futile exercise that my gene is forcing me to engage in.

Listen to my calls. Since morning, I have been here, calling out and sending my invitation to potential suitors! What happened to old-world chivalry? I, a lonely but beautiful lady in distress, but there is none to come forward. You, ugly-looking animals, with two long legs and thin protrusions in place of beautiful wings, look at me closely! See, how beautiful my shiny black feathers are? Wait, let me spread my wings and you can see their majesty. Have you seen my rufous neck? Observe how this move as I call. This rufous neck is the distinguishing mark that separates us from our other cousins.

Enough of this chit-chat! I think I am going to dive down a little and perch on that smaller tree yonder. There are several trees laden with fruits in the jungle on the opposite ridge. I am sure someone will see my beauty from there. How am I supposed to spend my monsoon otherwise? What will be the purpose? There is a beautiful hole nearby. No, no not that one. That was captured by an invading Palm Civet a few months back. What a little devil the civet is. So many elephants move around. Though they also have no wings, they are far

gentler to me. I have never been evicted by them. Another of my friends has nested down below. The hole is so near to the ground. There is a small patch of green land in front of her dwelling. She already produced a few beautiful eggs. Oh! What am I going to do? Time is passing by.

I have already found another hole you know. It is a little higher up from the ground. There is also a small patch of land in front. I can show you, but you must promise not to go near it. Wait till I finish my calling from here. The hole is perfect. I have already cleaned it with one of the suitors a few days back. But I am not sure where he is for the last few days. I do not remember quarrelling with him even once, nor did I demand any special fruit to taste his devotion to me. Still, he left without saying goodbye. I am sure it was not a goodbye intended. Don't get me wrong, I would love to have him back, but I can not wait for him the whole season. I do hope that any of the other girls did not steal him. That would be the most un-hornbillish thing to do!

Can you hear the sound of the heavy wings flapping through the fresh mountain air? It is coming nearer, I do hope that my partner whom I thought to have lost, is coming back. If my hope materialises, please do not tell him that I have been looking for others. Just say how anxiously I was calling him. My cawing was getting reflected from the hillsides and filling up the valley. I can surely count on your discretion, can't I?

Never mind! It is not him. He is the one who is nesting with my friend down below. He is taking fruits for her as she sits on her beautiful white eggs. She is going to put her beautiful beak out of the hole to collect the fruits he has gathered for her. So romantic, damn!





Rijan Roy Choudhury
Photography



Rijan Roy Choudhury
Photography





S. P. P. 11



Burn in hell, you pesky drongo! Why can it not leave me in peace? What have I done to be pestered by this small black bird? I can never understand why winged creatures like this can not follow the simple civil-avian rules. You two-legged mistakes of mother nature, do you also have these kinds of unsocial and unruly elements in your society?

Nah! Can't take this anymore. There are five suitors I know of, so I must cover a little more area and get away from this savage drongo. In the meantime, if you behave, you can drop by again later and I would probably be in a position to narrate the rest of my story to you. What will be the ending? Happy, don't you think? Sigh! Let's see. Till then, fly!

PS: In case you want to meet my moving image visit this link: <https://youtu.be/3zgJeS9yl6o>

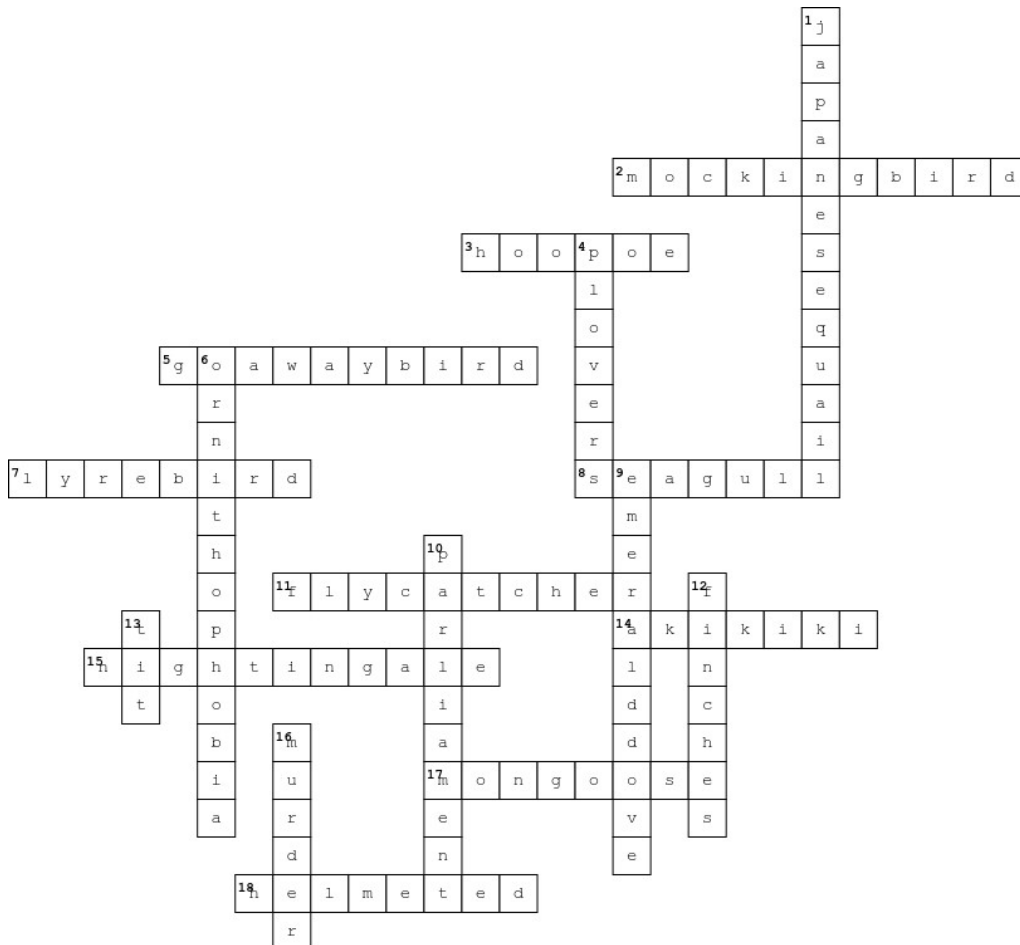
Facebook: www.facebook.com/srijanrc.photography

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/roychnaturegraphy/>

Ebird relevant day's checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S110471405>

Scientific data acknowledgement: 1. Wikipedia, 2. eBird

Srijan Roy Choudhury started photography as a hobby and soon evolved into a semi-professional pursuit. Three genres of photography are his calling - wildlife & nature, travel and still-life. He started bird-watching with his son 10 years back. Srijan also teaches Physics, which he has been doing for over two decades.





MYRIAD COLORS OF DREAM

SUDIPTO BANERJEE

While on the Sandakphu trip, 3 years ago, the thought of Chopta and Tunganath was seeded by Bunan, a close friend of mine. Since then, I dreamt about Lush green meadows, red and pink Rhododendrons, incessant twists and turns, and multiple faces of Chaukhamba and Kedarnath peaks on the way to Tunganath at ~ 11k ft....and.....the ever-constant factor in all those dreams were full of colorful Pheasants & Partridgesand Monal.

I kept nurturing it for the last 3 years. This year in May, I finally decided to go for it.....with consent from my family, we decided to make it a “family trip” which might be laced with some birding as well !!....well that’s how it goes ideally....my fellow birders, am sure, would know what I mean 😊

So that’s how it started....plan was a day’s trip to Deorital from Sarigram to be followed by a trek to Tunganath & Chandrashila from Chopta the next day. My boys freaked out as usual at the prospect of travel, trek, food, and lots of huffing and puffing...their favorite pastime!! My wife started preparing for this trek....something which she was to embark upon for the first time. I, of course, had started seeping in the feeling of gradually reaching towards a long-awaited trip to the “mini-Switzerland of India”!

Reached out to Yashpal Singh Negi Ji, one of the veterans of the region and one of the most trusted in the fraternity to extend his support to us. He gladly accepted to be there with us.

Now, on the first day, disaster struck for which there was no backup. My trekking shoe gave way, on our way to Deorital while we were on the way up!!!! Those who have traveled there would realize the situation. Terrible road condition, sole of the right pair halfway open in such a manner one can think of it as a slipper, my attention continuously flipping between trees and other surroundings and my feet and the road or whatever one calls it!! Somehow while I kept trudging along with great difficulty, the second one came fast & furious! The carabiner of my Camera sling snapped off! The carabiner is a small hook that holds the camera/lens mount with a sling. What that meant was, from then on, I would have to carry a 3+ kg gear all along with an already handicapped shoe. Negi Ji and his contacts saved me a bit with a bunch of FeviQuicks!!! But they also gave way 😞 This resulted in some delay in



our journey but our spirit was unperturbed!! We ensured we covered the area pretty much. Amongst many, my prize capture was Mrs. Gould's Sunbird at Deoriat and of course the serene landscape around the area.

With a makeshift sneaker, I started the Tunganath trek the next day and very soon realized why one needs a good shoe while trekking. While sliding down a Bugyal tracking a flock of Dark Breasted Rosefinch, my new makeshift partner betrayed and the ligament of my right knee expressed its disagreement with my misadventures. I ended up nursing my bruised knee while looking up the trek I am yet to complete and the unfinished tasks I have in mind. Negi Ji kept encouraging me and finding



easier routes to enable a relatively smooth passage for me considering the situation. In that state, he ensured I didn't miss the prize of the shrubs around Rhododendrons, The Golden Bush Robin....it literally tested my perseverance but finally rewarded me with some good shots....with an abundance of finches and warblers, I was lucky to get some really good shots of Alpine Accentor up near the Tunganath Shrine.



Way back or way down with a bruised ligament was never easy and I felt the pain at every step of my descent. To make matters worse, I missed Monal from a distance of 20-25 ft but its gorgeous flight down the meadow was such memorable sight!! I got a few shots of Monal though, but had to create a perspective since it was quite a far-off shot! A little dejected, while I was trying to think of the positives of this trip, I suddenly heard a loud call from Negi Ji..."Baanaarji Saab....Koklass" !!! Giving a damn to whatever happened to my knee, I started descending furiously...I will not let this one pass for sure!!

And then I saw him....at the backdrop of this heavenly lush green laced with small bright dots of Dandelion flowers in complete bloom, he was soaking the area looking up for his partner and moving around in a regal fashion. Well....I still could reminisce about those goosebumps, adrenalin shooting up on Mach 4, and hands trembling as the excitement screwing up the shots....not just about this beautiful bird but also about the overall condition and the surroundings which led me there. Could not thank the elements enough and no words can describe the effort and experiential knowledge of Negi Ji who not only knows the area like the back of his hands and bird calls, but his knowledge also transcends across plants, animals, their nature, and various facets of conservation.

Those 10 minutes or so I spent there will remain forever etched in my memory. Amongst many takeaways from my first family-cum-birding (umm hmm!) trip to the western Himalayas, I would forever cherish the time I spent with Negi Ji and learned from him.... by the way, he broke my jinx of Wren-babblers with Nepal, Pygmy, and Scaly-breasted in a single trip!!!

Thanks to my boys and wifey for being patient with me and my tantrums....we birders can really be some boring and difficult partners on long trips :-)

Sudipto Banerjee is an avid nature and bird lover who tries to earn his sustenance through his association with a tech company. Nature, its unpredictability and its photography keeps his learning curve high all the time!

An Announcement

**BWS ANNUAL
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DECEMBER 17-21, 2022

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মুক্ত বিহঙ্গ উর্বশী বসু

পাখি দেখা ও পাখির ছবি ক্যামেরা বন্দি করার নেশা গত চার বছরের। তার আগে পাখির নানা ছবি দেখতাম বা পড়তাম নানান ম্যাগাজিনে। বান্ধবগড়ে যাওয়া ঠিক হলো, খুব উত্তেজিত, একটা টেলিফোটা লেন্স কিনে ফেললাম বাঘের ছবি তুলবো বলে। জঙ্গল সাফারিতে যখন বের হতাম সকাল ৫.৩০-এ সূর্যোদয়ের ক্ষণিকে শুধু কানে আসতো নানা পাখির ডাক। তখন মনে হতো যদি পাখিগুলো আমার সামনে এসে বসতো তাহলে দু-একটার ছবি তুলতাম। যাক, জঙ্গলে ঢুকে বাঘমামার দেখা পাওয়া ভাগ্যের ব্যাপার বা ক্ষণিকের। কিন্তু পাখি প্রচুর। সেই প্রথম ইন্ডিয়ান পিট্রা (দেশি শুমচা), ইন্ডিয়ান রোলার (নীলকণ্ঠ), বাজ, ইন্ডিয়ান প্যারাডাইস ফ্লাইক্যাচার (শাহ-বুলবুল) ইত্যাদির ছবি তুললাম। নেশা ধরল। তখন বুঝলাম পাখির ছবি তোলা বেশ চ্যালেঞ্জিং এবং খুব সহজ নয়।



কোভিডের ঠিক আগেই শিলিগুড়ি থেকে মাত্র একঘন্টায় গাড়িতে পৌঁছে গেলাম জলপাইগুড়ি জেলায় তিস্তা নদীর পশ্চিমে একটি ছোট গ্রাম— গাজোলডোবা। শীতকালে পরিযায়ী পাখিদের সমারোহ। সকালে ভোরের আলো ফুটতে না ফুটতেই পাখির ডাকে ঘুম ভাঙলো। কি সুন্দর দূষণমুক্ত এক বকবকে সকাল। বেড়িয়ে পড়লাম জলের ধারে যাওয়ার উদ্দেশ্যে। অটোতে পাঁচ মিনিট, জলের ধার দিয়ে। ছোট ছোট নৌকা। দুজন বসতে পারে। আর চালক। শুধু চালক হলেই হবে না, সে যত পাখির সম্পর্কে অভিজ্ঞ হবে ততোই ভাল। আমার সৌভাগ্য হয়েছিল সেইরকমই একজনকে পাওয়ার। তার নাম রবি। গত ১১-১২ বছর ধরে এই পেশায়। এই নৌকা সারাদিনের জন্য বা আধ বেলার জন্য ভাড়া করা যায়। সে এক অদ্ভুত অভিজ্ঞতা। কতো ধরনের নানা রঙের, নানান দেশের পরিযায়ী পাখি। জানেন তো, পৃথিবীর প্রায় ৪০ শতাংশ পাখি এক জায়গা থেকে অন্য জায়গায় ঘুরে বেড়ায়। এরা মূলতঃ সাইবেরিয়া, মধ্য এশিয়া, পূর্ব ইউরোপ, লাদাখ থেকে শীতে এখানে চলে আসে উপযুক্ত পরিবেশ, খাদ্য ইত্যাদির সুবিধা পাওয়ার জন্য। হাজার হাজার মাইল পেড়িয়ে ঠিক পৌঁছে যায় বছর বছর। একে একে চোখে পড়ল লেসার হুইসলিং ডাক, রুডি শেলডাক, কমন শেলডাক, কমন টিল, টাফটেড ডাক, ইউরেশিয়ান উইজেন, মালার্ড এবং আরো অনেক।



এই রকমই আরেকটি জায়গা হল কলকাতা থেকে প্রায় ১২১ কিলোমিটার দূরে পূর্ব বর্ধমানের ছোট গ্রাম পূর্বস্থলী, সেখান থেকে 'চুপির চর', যেখানে শীতে ভিড় করতে শুরু করে পরিযায়ী পাখিরা। নৌকায় করে দুই থেকে তিন কিলোমিটার ব্যাপী অশ্বক্ষুরাকৃতি জলাশয়ে ঘুরতে ঘুরতে নানান প্রজাতির পাখি দেখা আর ছবি তোলায় আনন্দই আলাদা। নানা প্রজাতির হাঁস এবং গাজোলডোবায় দেখা নানান ধরনের জলের পাখিগুলোই চোখে পড়ল বেশি, আর তার সাথে মুরহেন, রাঙামুড়ি, গাডওয়াল, কমনকুট, গ্রে হেরণ, লেসার হুইসলিং ডাক ইত্যাদি।

তারপর গেলাম হিমালয়ের কোলে ছোট গ্রাম "লাটপানচার"। শীতের শেষে হনবিল দেখতে। হিমালয়ের প্রচুর স্থানীয় ও অতিথি পাখির সাথে পরিচিত হলাম। ওরিয়েন্টাল হোয়াইট আই (বাবুনাই), সুলতান টিট,

স্কারলেট মিনিভেট, রেড হেডেড ট্রোগান, ভারডিটার ফ্লাইক্যাচার, চেস্টনাট-বিল্ড নাটহ্যাচ আর সান বার্ড। তবে সে যাত্রায় হনবিলের দেখা মিলল না। পরের বার গেলাম (মহানন্দা ওয়াইল্ড লাইফ স্যানচুয়ারির অন্তর্গত) তরাই উপত্যকায় - শিবখোলা। নরবুং চা বাগানকে সঙ্গী করে আঁকাবাকা রাস্তা চলে গিয়েছে। সেখানেই দেখা মিলল গ্রেট হনবিলের।

তারপর কোভিডে সবাই ঘর বন্দী হয়ে পড়লাম। তখন অনেক পড়াশোনা করতে লাগলাম বন্যপ্রাণী ফটোগ্রাফি আর পাখির ফটোগ্রাফি নিয়ে। অনেক কিছু জানার আছে, শুধু ক্যামেরা হাতে থাকলেই হয় না। যাক তারপর গেলাম সুন্দরবন ২০২২ এর মার্চে। তবে বাঘ দেখতে নয়, নানা ধরণের মাছরাঙা ও অন্য পরিযায়ী পাখি দেখতে। দেখা মিলল ছয় রকমের মাছরাঙ্গার (কমন, ব্ল্যাক-ক্যাপড, ব্রাউন-উইং, কলার্ড, ওয়াইট-থ্রোট্ট আর প্যায়েড কিংফিশার), ইউরেশিয়ান কার্লিউ, হুইস্পেল, ব্রান্সিগী কাইট, স্যান্ডপাইপার ইত্যাদি ইত্যাদি। কলকাতার খুব কাছে এরকম আরেকটি জায়গা-সাঁতরাগাছি ঝিল। একসময় অনেক পরিযায়ী পাখি আসতো তবে এখন কমে গেছে। আমি সব সময়ে খবরের সন্ধানে থাকি কোথায় কখন কোন পাখি আসছে; পারলে সেখানে চলে যাওয়ার চেষ্টা করি।



কলকাতার মধ্যে রাজারহাটের জলাভূমি বা মাঠে চোখে পড়েছে ওয়াইট ওয়াগটেল, লাল মুনিয়া, প্রিনিয়া, দোয়েল। রবীন্দ্র সরোবরে দেখা মিলেছে

ব্ল্যাক-হেডেড ওরিওল, টিয়া, ব্লু-থ্রোট্টেড বারবেট, লিনিয়টেড বারবেট, কোকিল, ইন্ডিয়ান ব্লু-রবিন, কুটুরে পেঁচা ইত্যাদি। সল্টলেকের সেন্ট্রাল পার্কে দেখেছি থিক-বিল্ড আর ইয়েলো-ফুটেড গ্রীন পিজিওন। কলকাতা থেকে একটু দূরে কামদুনির কাছে খড়িবাড়ির মাছের ভেড়িতে দেখেছিলাম প্যায়েড এভোসেট। এরাও আসে সুদূর ইউরোপ, মধ্য এশিয়া, রাশিয়া থেকে। কয়েকদিনের অতিথি ছিল তাই ছবি তোলায় সৌভাগ্য হয়েছিল। এছাড়া কলকাতার কাছে আছে জোকা, শ্যামখোলা, ডিপ্লেপোতা, চিন্তামণি কর বার্ড স্যাংচুয়ারি। আর আছে বারুইপুরে মাইলের পর মাইল জলাভূমি আর বড় বড় ঘাসের বিস্তৃর্ণ মাঠ। শীতকালে বারে বারে ছুটে যাই নানাপ্রজাতির নানান পাখির সন্ধানে। কয়েকটার নাম বলি - ব্লু থ্রোট্ট, ল্যাপউইং, ব্রোঞ্জ-উইং জাকানা, এশিয়ান ওপেনবিল, সিনামন বিটার্ন, সাইবেরিয়ান স্টোনচ্যাট ওয়াটার রেল, ট্রাই-কালার মুনিয়া,

বুশচ্যাট ইত্যাদি। নাম বলে শেষ হবে না। এই হলো আমার এখনও পর্যন্ত পাখির সম্ভার। নাম যতো না বললাম তার থেকে বেশিই দেখেছি আরো অনেক প্রজাতির পাখি। আর বাড়ির কাছেই বেশ কিছু দেখেছি রবীন্দ্র সরোবরে। এখানে সারাবছরই কিছু না কিছু পাখি থাকে, তবে শীতকালে নানা প্রজাতির পাখির সমাগমবেশী। ভোরবেলায় সহজে চলে যাওয়া যায়। এখানেই দেখা মিলেছে ইন্ডিয়ান ব্লু-রবিন, ইন্ডিয়ান পিটা, নানা ধরনের বসন্তবৌরি, নানা ধরনের মাছরাঙা, তাইগা ফ্লাইক্যাচার, নানা জলের পাখি, আরো কত কি!

এই পাখি দেখতে গিয়ে অনেকের সঙ্গে আলাপও হয়। কেউ কেউ শুধু দূরবীন দিয়ে নজর রাখে, তবে বেশীরভাগই আমার মতো ভারী ক্যামেরা হাতে নজরে পড়ে।

একটা কথা বলে শেষ করি, আমাদের সকলকে ভবিষ্যতের কথা ভেবে সংরক্ষণের কথা ভাবা উচিত। এই চারিদিকে জলাশয়, ম্যানগ্রোভ ও বিস্তীর্ণ তৃণভূমি যে জ্বালিয়ে দেওয়া হচ্ছে তার জন্য পরিবেশের ভারসাম্য যেমন নষ্ট হয়, গ্রিনহাউস প্রভাব, তাপমাত্রা বৃদ্ধি এবং জলবায়ুর ভারসাম্যহীনতাকে যেমন প্রভাবিত করে, তেমনই পশুপাখিদেরও ক্ষতি হয়। পৃথিবীর প্রায় ৭০ শতাংশ প্রাণী গাছপালাওলা বনে বাস করে; তারা আস্তে আস্তে বিলুপ্তির পথে। পরিবেশের ভারসাম্য রক্ষা করা এবং প্রাকৃতিক দুর্যোগের সময় পাখিদের রক্ষা করার জন্য দেশের অনেক সংগঠন কাজ করছে তাদের সঙ্গে হাত মেলাতে আমাদেরও সকলকে এগিয়ে আসা উচিত। আর কয়েক বছর পর হয়তো এতো যা পাখির গল্প বললাম তারা আর আসবে না! পাখি দেখা আমার কাছে খুবই রিল্যাক্সিং ও আনন্দদায়ক। এই নেশায় অনেককেই নেশাগ্রস্থ। তাই একটু বেশি ভীড়। তাই পাখিকে বিব্রত না করে দূর থেকে নিঃশব্দে ছবি তোলার আনন্দ নেওয়াই ভাল। এদের সংরক্ষন করা খুব জরুরি।

চারিদিকে সচেতনতামূলক সাইনবোর্ড দিয়ে মানুষকে সাবধান করতে হবে নয়তো পাখি ও পরিবেশ দুই রক্ষা করা অসম্ভব।

Urvashi Basu an interior designer by profession. She resides in Kolkata with her family. Urvashi is a keen photographer and an avid bird watcher.



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.



KENAI FJORDS GLACIERS, CLIFFS AND FEATHERS!

AMITAVA DUTTA

Circa 2022, 20th of May, I woke up to a foggy and chilly morning in the harbour town of Seward, Alaska. My watch displayed 6 AM & 6° C. Under normal circumstances, I would have convinced my mind n body to remain insulated under the quilt. It was a day of reckoning! This was the day I had been waiting for a long time, over 2 years! In no time, we were all ready for the drive down to the Harbour Masters' Office at Seward Harbour. This would be my third pelagic trip, one that I had been eagerly waiting for.

On our first trip in Sep 2018, we sailed from the Arctic town of Kirkenes (Norway) to the Hanseatic city of Bergen (Norway), a 6-day sail on Hurtigrutens' passenger ferry along the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea. We witnessed quite a few pelagic birds on that trip like the Northern Gannet, Arctic Skua, Kittiwake, Sea Eagle, and many species of Gull. The second pelagic trip I attended was conducted by the Birdwatchers' Society in mid-April



On the road from Anchorage to Seward

2021. This was a two-day affair to explore the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. This trip encountered mainly Tern species, Brown-headed gull and Dolphins.

Back in 2020 we (Runa, Ahana, Arjun and I) had planned a 15-day self-drive tour of Alaska. As it turned out, this had to be pushed out twice (2020 and 2021) due to the pandemic. Fast forward Circa 2022, we finally flew into Anchorage on the 19th of May, picked up our rental vehicle and headed off to Seward after a quick lunch. Seward is a small port town located on Resurrection Bay. It is situated on Alaska's southern coast, approximately 190 km by road from Alaska's largest city, Anchorage. The drive was breath taking and rejuvenating to say the least. Seward is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park, where glaciers flow from the Harding Icefield into coastal fjords. Surrounded by peaks and steep cliff, the fjords are a whale and porpoise habitat.

During my initial research, while planning this trip, I got in touch with Captain Leif Brasher at Northern Latitude Adventure, Seward. I was informed about the Birding trips they conducted in the Kenai peninsula. They had a 6-seater boat ideally suited for bird watching, which he could offer for a private charter. June - July is perhaps a better time to visit Alaska, when summer has truly set in, and ice on the road and meadows have melted. But that's also when it gets too crowded, and prices go sky high. We had thus decided to visit during the shoulder season. The only hassle was that in 2022 not only had it snowed heavily, it came in pretty late too. So here in the 3rd week of May, it had still quite a lot of snow around, many of the trails remained closed, and the Salmon had yet to begin their breeding run since the run-off glaciers had a lot of loose mud in them. On our part, we could only pray and hope that the my 'dream birds' had arrived.



Anxiously on the 19th, after landing and informing Capt Lief that we had arrived, I hesitantly asked - have they come? After a brief pause ... he said 'I think Capt Nick had seen a few!' It was the 'Puffins' that I was so desperate and obsessed about. Distinctively beautiful birds. We had missed them during our Norway sailing, as they had migrated south by the time we crossed the Lofoten Islands, where the Atlantic Puffins breed. Puffins belong to the family Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins) in the bird genus *Fratercula*. These are pelagic seabirds that feed primarily by diving in the water. They breed in large colonies on coastal cliffs or offshore islands, nesting in crevices among rocks or burrows. Two species, the Tufted puffin and Horned puffin, are found in the North Pacific Ocean. In contrast, the Atlantic puffin is found in the North Atlantic Ocean.

For Runa, the dream was to watch Orca (*Orcinus Orca*), the killer whale, a toothed whale belonging to the oceanic dolphin family, of which it is the largest member. Many Orcas populate Southeast Alaska and are frequently seen around the bay. We had missed sighting the Orca during our Norway sailing; thus, it remained on the wish list. I guess each one of us had our own enigmatic and occult yearning! This makes exploring nature and wildlife so invigorating, intoxicating and irresistible.

Thus on 20th May morning at 0800 hrs, the four of us were in front of the Northern Latitude Adventure office praying and hoping that the fog & clouds would not fizzle our spirits. Capt Nick, with confidence, said the clouds and fog are only at the harbour, out in the Sea into the gulf of Alaska, it is all clear! Though windy and chilly.

Pumped up and excited, we walked up to the jetty. We were given a short introduction to our boat, "Urayuli" (Urayuli, or 'Hairy creatures' that live in the woodland areas of southwestern Alaska) and it's emergency procedure. We sailed out of the harbour around 0815 and were



Kenai Fjord and its glacial cliffs

*Bald Eagles lined the cliffs
closer to the shore*



soon in the open Sea full of josh and excitement. We had the luxury of choosing where to sit and/or hang around with just four of us. The boat had a heated main cabin with seating arrangements and a toilet. It had a small pantry too. I chose to be out around the stern or the bow until forced inside by the chill or the boat's rock n roll. Over the next 8 hours, I kept



1000 pounder Stellar Sealion (Male)

shuttling between the deck and the comfort of the heated cabin. While the Sea was clear and calm, the wind was ice cold, and when the boat cruised near full throttle, you better be secured inside.

As we sailed past Resurrection Bay, an enthralling panorama of the Kenai peninsula emerged. A spectacular theatre of snow-capped mountains along the region's glaciated coastline and steep cliffs of the fjords. Amongst the first few mammals to capture our attention were the Northern Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni* - a member of the weasel family), floating on their backs and appeared to be taking a nap in the calm Sea. Not far away, a pair of humpbacks were heading towards Resurrection Bay. We watched in wonder as these mammals went past our boat. The Humpbacks had arrived from their warmer regions to the cold feeding waters, where they would feed in plenty over the next few months to build up their energy deposits. Above our heads were flocks of Glaucous-winged Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes crisscrossing the sky. Those are the two prominent Gulls found in the Kenai region. Lined along the coast on top of the trees were numerous Bald Eagles nests well-guarded by caring parents. I had never witnessed such a dense population of Bald Eagles at such close quarters ever earlier. On top of the flattened rocky cliffs were Stellar Sea Lions asleep, as if nothing mattered. Minded by the colossal male who guarded his harem with the utmost attention. We also came across Hoary Marmot and Mountain Goats on those rocky enclaves.

We saw flocks of Black Guillemot. One by one, we came across many sea birds Common mures, Pelagic cormorants, and Murrelets, notwithstanding the Gulls. And then, suddenly,



from the corner of an eye, a Puffin flew past. That's it! We had spotted Puffins. Captain Nick was ecstatic and navigated the boat towards the cliff on which was a large flock of Horned Puffins. We watched in awe the acrobatics of these incredible birds - how they dived, took off from the water, and played around.

Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) – a black-and-white seabird with a beautiful orange-and-yellow bill. Its 'horns' are small fleshy spikes extending above breeding adults' eyes. Whereas other puffin species dig earthen burrows for their nests, Horned Puffins typically nest on cliffs. The Horned Puffin is a genuinely pelagic species, spending most of its life far from land in the company of oceanic species, such as albatrosses and shearwaters. They only visit the land to breed in May / June. Most of the Horned Puffins we saw had paired up and were busy tiding up their nests, if not diving for food. Often referred to as the 'sea parrots' by sailors, the Alaskan natives used Puffin skins and beaks for their clothing and ornaments. It is one of the most iconic birds of Alaska.

It was noon by then, and we slowly sailed toward Aialuk Glacier. There amongst the chunks of glacial ice, we dropped anchor. We devoured our lunch. With a contented mind, the sandwiches and soda never tasted so good.

As we washed the traces of ham and lettuce down our throats, across on the melting



Sumptuous lunch at the mouth of Glacier

glacial snow were several Harbour Seals keenly observing our cacophony and gastronomic activity while basking in the sun. Post lunch, we decided to turn back and explore the smaller islands of rocks & cliffs around 'No Name island'. Supposedly a vast rookery of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Common Murres. They were there by the hundreds! While we were engrossed in looking at their activities, we witnessed a sole Tufted Puffin on the cliff face. That's it! And then, one by one emerged yet another flock of my dream bird.

Tufted Puffin (*Fratercula cirrhata*) – are cool birds easily recognized by their yellowish tufts. They appear more serious and confident, unlike its other two brethren species. The tufted puffins are visible across a broader range. Few other seabirds range so widely at Sea, from icy waters of the Chukchi Sea to the warm, subtropical expanse of the Central North Pacific Ocean and east to west from the California Current to the Kuroshio Current of Japan. Their



Tufted Puffin

breeding range is equally vast and covers extreme climatic regimes, from cactus-covered rocks in southern California to frozen cliffs of the coastal Alaskan Arctic. The Tufted Puffin is perhaps more seafaring pelagic species. It spends most of its life far from land and has a diet more similar to shearwaters and petrels (*Pterodroma spp.*) than to most other alcids.

The return journey continued to be as dramatic as the outward sailing. There never was a dull moment. We soon encountered a pod of Orca (*Killer Whales*) on a hunt. They were just amazing to watch. They spun around in circles, and with every rotation, they kept reducing the size of the ring and eventually a synchronized dive in to take the prey. While on the hunt, one of the Orca, perhaps fascinated or inquisitively playful, sprinted towards our boat. It seemed he would topple us. At the last moment, it dived under the boat, emerged on the



Common Murre in flight

other side, and sprayed water from its spout as a mark of triumph or as if acknowledging the scary fun! Quite a disbelief, but indeed demonstrating its intelligence and playful nature.

Not a moment to sit back, soon after the Orcas were gone, we came across a flock of roughly 12 Rhinoceros Auklets playing around. This was entirely unexpected and a much pleasant surprise. We simply watched their rituals until they slipped away. Rhinoceros Auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*) – a medium-sized auk and a close relative of the Puffins, it is distinguished by a prominent rhinoceros-like “horn” projecting above the upper mandible in breeding plumage. Most of the North American population breeds on several islands in British Columbia and adjacent parts of Washington and southeast Alaska. Being a nocturnal auk, it was quite a surprise to witness the flock at this time of the day. Perhaps it may be crepuscular or diurnal in some regions.

Almost 3 PM, closer to Resurrection Bay, and as if to bid us farewell, we had a pair of Humpbacks greeting us with their customary dives and flapping of their tails.

Phew! What a day.

This was just the start of our Alaskan Adventure. Over the next 12 days, we realized what Alaska truly signifies. From temperate rainforests to arctic tundra, a wealth of ecosystems span Alaska’s vast and varied landscapes. As the largest US state, Alaska has 1/3 of United States federal lands. Over 1,000 vertebrate species are found in the state. On the Copper River Delta alone, five to eight million shorebirds stop to forage and rest each spring on

their way to arctic breeding grounds. Alaska is globally significant for its large tracts of intact habitats, which support complete wildlife assemblages, while also maintaining a huge carbon sink.



Rhinoceros Auklet



Horned Puffin - a Dreamers' Tale

Amitava Dutta 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.



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