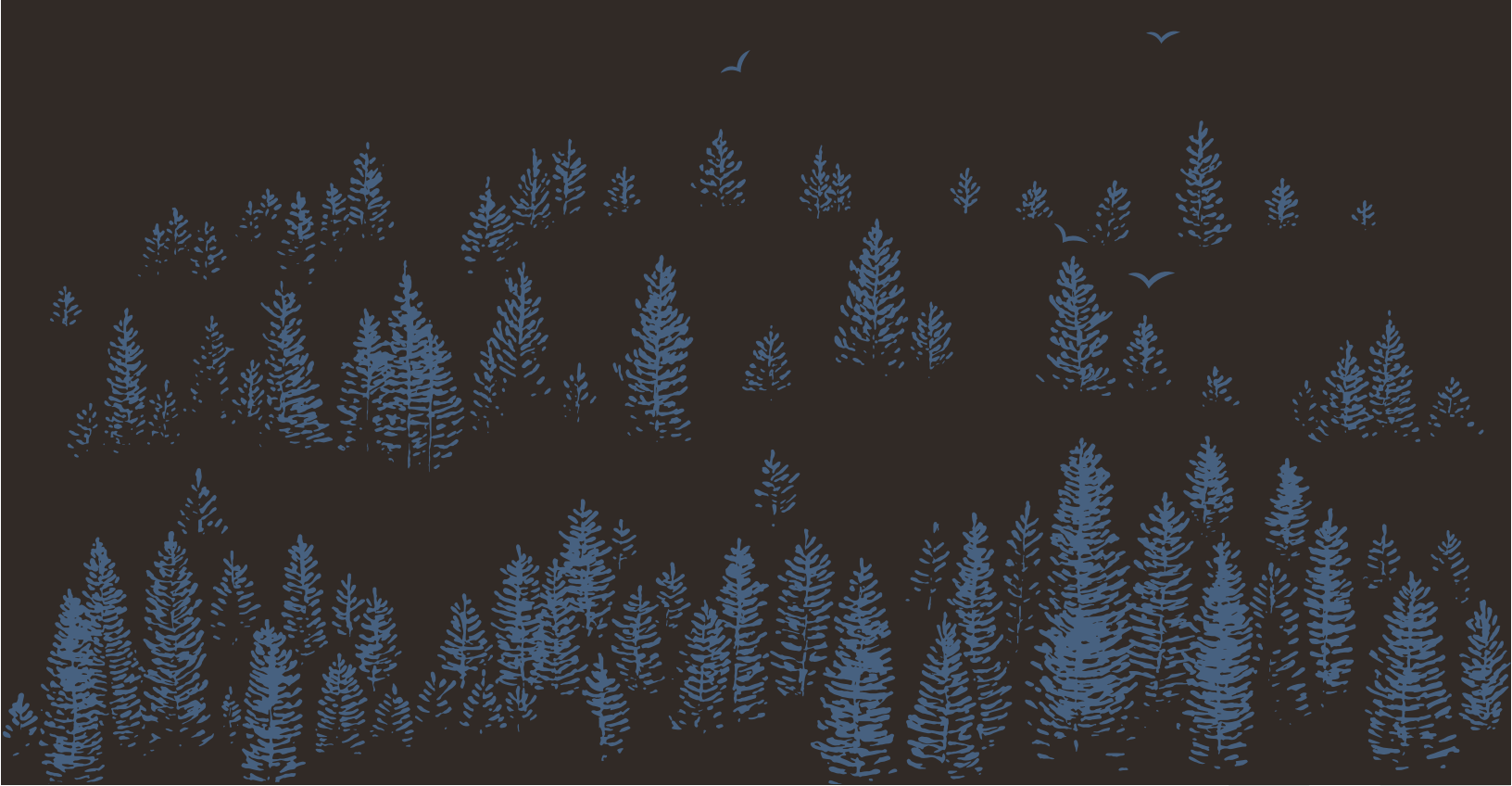


NEWSLETTER

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*“Preserve and cherish the pale blue dot,
the only home we’ve ever known”
—Carl Sagan*



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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Brown-wood Owl

EDITORIAL

Hello Birders,

Hope the New Year got off to a pleasant start!

The flurry of social media posts and messages confirm the assumption. Every birder worth their salt seems to be busy out in the field. Everyone I tried to reach was either busy or transiting from one birding location to the other. Reminded me of the term 'dyed-in-the-wool-birder'!

Thinking about it, who could be such dyed-in-the-wool birder(s) at Birdwatchers' Society (BWS)? Hardcore birders! Well, BWS wrapped up 2022 with its annual birding camp in December. Birds, wool & birders in the chilly forests of Majua (near Singalila)! There you get it ... the 'dyed in the wool birder'! We had written about the Annual Camp location in our last issue. Going by the feedback, it was an exceptionally successful gathering. If you are served piping hot Biryani at 5500 ft, evening lecture sessions in the cosy warmth of the sips and spirits at the homestay, topped with a sighting of the Himalayan Owl, what more

can you ask for? As fellow member Sudipto Roy writes in his report on the Annual Camp 2022 in this issue. Hip! Hip! Hurrah! to Mridulkanti Kar and Sourav Mandal for raising the bar for future camps. Everyone across the team had only words of praise for your hospitality.

Pampa Mistri, member & veteran birder, continues with her update on unique and rare sightings during November & December 2022. Santanu Manna, Vice President of BWS and a senior birder, has described Naumann's Thrush (*Turdus naumanni*) a rare bird sighted in West Bengal.

Owl has been the talk of the town. We thus decided to dedicate this issue to OWLs, the birds from the order Strigiformes. The Owl on the front cover of this issue has been painted by Smt. Ira Bhaduri (mother of our member Dr Anirban Bhaduri). Whereas beautiful Brown Wood Owl has been taken by our member and experienced birder Mr. Sudip Ghosh. We are thankful to Smt. Ira Bhaduri & Mr. Sudip Ghosh.

Talking about Owls, it is difficult to ignore their influences on our culture and society. Dr Swapan Thakur, teacher, writer, researcher and historian, has written about Owl in Bengal's folklore & culture. A masterpiece! The original article being in Bengali, has been translated for Fantail by Dev Baul, while Pampa Mistri assisted in editing. We hope to publish the Bengali version at a future date.

Dr Sukanya Datta, retired Chief Scientist of CSIR, writes about how Owls transcend immortality as they remain in use for centuries in brands, stories, cinema, TV series, and everywhere you look around. An interesting article by senior birder Souvik Roychoudhury talks about how knowing about Owl behaviour, calls and body parts helps in sighting and identification. Have you ever heard of an Owl for an Owl? Raunak Patra, birdwatcher and researcher with WII, writes about how the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service culled an owl species to save another owl species from extinction. Pretty unique indeed.

Photographers across the globe are drawn to photographing owls because they are beautiful, fascinating creatures that offer a unique set of challenges and rewards. This issue carries a collage of some fascinating photographs contributed by our members with special emphasis on Owls seen in West Bengal. Hope you like them.

Read about a unique cultural event, 'Mangal Shobhajatra and Owl' (মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা এবং প্যাঁচা) held in our neighbouring state Bangladesh contributed by senior member Dr Kanad Baidya and Shiladitya Mukhopadhyay.

This apart, we have our usual sections covering crossword, and cartoon, including an update on BWS activities. The Bird walks organized by BWS are becoming quite popular. It is now a regular activity each month, and attendance is quite encouraging.

Finally, before signing off, would like to highlight that we have received significant contributions from members and birders on the current theme. We have a fair backlog of articles and photographs contributed and not included in this issue. Some of which are worth publishing. The editorial team is thus considering continuing with Owl as the theme for Issue#4 Vol2. Hats off to Dr Kanad Baidya for guiding us in putting this together.

Like before, we eagerly await to hear your suggestions and feedback. Please do drop in a word whenever possible. It means a lot!

Cheers!

Fantail Editorial Team

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BIRD ARRIVALS FRESH & RARE

Pampa Mistri

We are happy to collate and present the fresh and rare bird sightings during Nov – Dec 2022. The winged guests have kept our folks busy and engaged though some reports indicated lesser numbers this year.

2022 Arrivals (November-December)				
Sr No	BIRD	LOCN - 1	LOCN - 2	DATE FIRST SIGHTED IN THIS SEASON
1	Asian Subtail	BTR, Jayanti		01-Nov-2022
2	Siberian Blue Robin	BTR, Jayanti		01-Nov-2022
3	Common Rosefinch	Halishahar		02-Nov-2022
4	Green Crowned Warbler	RS		02-Nov-2022
5	Chestnut-winged Cuckoo	RS		02-Nov-2022
6	Ferruginous Flycatcher	RS		03-Nov-2022
7	Scaly Thrush	RS	Purulia	05-Nov-2022
8	Black-headed Bunting (Breeding)	Halishahar		05-Nov-2022
9	Black Stork	Mayurakshi Riverbed, Suri, Birbhum	Gajoldoba	05-Nov-2022
10	Slender-billed Oriole	Rajarhat, Kolkata		05-Nov-2022
11	Dark-sided Flycatcher	Botanical Garden, Howrah	RS	05-Nov-2022
12	Godwit (probably Black-tailed)	Diara, Hooghly		06-Nov-2022
13	Lesser Cuckoo	RS		06-Nov-2022
14	Yellow-breasted Bunting	Halishahar		06-Nov-2022
15	Short-eared Owl	Bakreshwar Dam	TG, Jalpaiguri	11-Nov-2022
16	Yellow-vented Warbler	TG, Jalpaiguri		13-Nov-2022
17	Long-toed Stint	Diara, Hooghly		13-Nov-2022

18	Pallid Harrier	Salboni		14-Nov-2022
19	Crested Bunting	TG, Jalpaiguri		15-Nov-2022
20	Greylag Goose	Baruipur		16-Nov-2022
21	Lanceolated Warbler	Baruipur		16-Nov-2022
22	Greater Scaup	Gajoldoba		16-Nov-2022
23	Tickell's Blue Flycatcher	RS		17-Nov-2022
24	Small Niltava	RS		18-Nov-2022
25	Little Bunting	Boshipota	Baruipur	19-Nov-2022
26	White-tailed Robin	RS		21-Nov-2022
27	Osprey	Rajarhat, Kolkata		25-Nov-2022
28	Spotted Bush Warbler	Baruipur		25-Nov-2022
29	Chestnut-eared Bunting	Baruipur	Halishahar	26-Nov-2022
30	Hume's Lark	Diguli, WB-Jharkhand Border		27-Nov-2022
31	Bonnelli's Eagle	Diguli, WB-Jharkhand Border		27-Nov-2022
32	Eurasian/Common Teal	Purbasthali		27-Nov-2022
33	Red-necked Falcon	Panchanandapur		27-Nov-2022
34	Pied Bushchat	Baruipur		29-Nov-2022
35	Shaheen Falcon	TG, Jalpaiguri		29-Nov-2022
36	Falcated Duck	Gajoldoba		01-Dec-2022
37	Gadwal x Falcated Duck	Gajoldoba		01-Dec-2022
38	Black-faced Bunting	Rajarhat, Kolkata		04-Dec-2022
39	Eared (Black-necked) Grebe	Bakreshwar Dam		10-Dec-2022
40	Jungle Nightjar	Kakrajhor, WB-Jharkhand border		10-Dec-2022
41	Malabar Pied Hornbill	Kakrajhor, WB-Jharkhand border		11-Dec-2022
42	Rosy Starling	Diara, Hooghly		11-Dec-2022
43	Blue-throated Barbet (rubescens morph)	Jayanti		12-Dec-2022
44	Banded Bay Cuckoo	Burnpur		13-Dec-2022
45	Asian House Martin	Damodar River, Mejia Bridge, Ranigunj		16-Dec-2022
46	Common Shelduck	Henry Island		17-Dec-2022
47	Great Crested Grebe	Purbasthali		18-Dec-2022
48	Great Knot	Kargil, Fraserganj		18-Dec-2022
49	Red Knot	Kargil, Fraserganj		18-Dec-2022
50	Indian Skimmer	Mathurapur, Malda		20-Dec-2022

51	Common Golden-eye	Gajoldoba		24-Dec-2022
52	Greater Spotted Eagle	Baruipur		24-Dec-2022
53	Grey Sibia	Kalimpong		24-Dec-2022
54	Bristled Grassbird	Baruipur		26-Dec-2022
55	Ibis Bill	Jhalong, Kalimpong		26-Dec-2022
56	Western Yellow Wagtail	Boshipota, Hooghly		28-Dec-2022
57	Black Eagle	CK Road, West Medinipur		28-Dec-2022
58	Black-browed Reed Warbler	Baruipur		29-Dec-2022
59	Nordmann's Greenshank	Hijuli and Medinagar beach, East Medinipur		29-Dec-2022
60	Lesser Adjutant	Sahapur, Bortir Beel		31-Dec-2022
61	Ashy Prinia	Sahapur, Bortir Beel		31-Dec-2022
Legend: RS - Rabindra Sarovar; LOCN- Location; BTR - Buxa Tiger Reserve; TG - Teesta Grassland				

Pampa Mistri a resident of Kolkata is a senior member of Birdwatchers' Society.



RARITIES OF WEST BENGAL

Santanu Manna

Status of Naumann's Thrush (*Turdus naumanni*) and its hybrids with Dusky Thrush *T. naumanni* x *T. eunomus* in West Bengal

Naumann's Thrush (*Turdus naumanni*) is paler and more orangish than Dusky Thrush. Adult males are the brightest-coloured and young females have patchy black on the throat and chest. The plain wings without Dusky's rufous panelling, less contrasting head pattern and orange-scaled underparts are the good ID features of Naumann's Thrush. Hybrids show a combination of Dusky and Naumann's features.

Naumann's Thrush mainly breeds in central and eastern Siberia and winters in extreme south-eastern Russia, China, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and, rarely, in Japan (Clement & Hathway 2000; Collar 2020).

On 18th Nov 2022, Pem Tshering Tamang, a bird guide, saw a thrush at Ghoom (27° 0'32.69"N, 88°15'12.95"E, alt 2283 m asl), in Darjeeling district in the morning. He uploaded his photograph on Facebook as Naumann's Thrush. Later I sent his photograph to Mr. Praveen J and Abhinav Chaudhury for the ID confirmation and they corroborated the ID as a hybrid of Naumann's and Dusky thrush. More striking head pattern, dark ear coverts, black & rufous markings on underparts indicate that it was a hybrid of Naumann's and Dusky Thrush.





Photo by Pem Tshering Tamang



Photo by Supriyo Ghatak



Photo by Samrat Saha

One hybrid with dark ear coverts and crown, white supercilium, and rufous-brown markings on underparts, was seen on 30 December 2010 at Teesta Riverbed in Jalpaiguri, Jalpaiguri District at alt.80 m asl. (Ghatak 2010).

A thrush with mixed features of Naumann's and Dusky was seen on 10 April 2020 at Buxa Tiger Reserve, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri District (Saha 2020). Although this bird has orange-red markings on flanks, dark rufous-brown marking on throat, and blackish lores, ear coverts, and crown ruled out a pure individual. The pure Naumann's Thrush records of India are from Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. Other records from Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim are all hybrid birds and from Assam, a sighting record.

Acknowledgements:

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OWL LORES IN FOLK CULTURES OF BENGAL

Dr. Swapan Kumar Thakur

Preamble: The article “Owl Lores in Folk Culture of Bengal” is an abridged translation from the original Bengali version titled “লৌকিক সংস্কৃতিতে পেচকপুরাণ” (*Loukik Sanskriti te Pechakpuran*). Dev Baul has undertaken the English translation for the Birdwatcher’s Society. Pampa Mistri abridged and edited it to adapt it to Fantail. In due course, we will try to publish the Bengali version subject to the readers’ requests.

|| One ||

The Bengali culture has been enriched by a bird that epitomises contrasting emotions like fear or good fortune, life and death, angel or demon, saviour or destroyer — the Owl aka Pechak.

Uruk pakshi (the owl) has gained a significant place internationally in the arenas of religion, philosophy, folk literature-art and culture. Bengal is no exception. Before discussing the role and influence of Pechak in the folk ethos, let me draw your attention to two extinct phenomena.



Last dawn of the *Bhadra* (the last month of the rainy season in the Bengali calendar, mid-August to mid-September); a mild breeze is brushing past the dewdrops on the paddy blades; an endless expanse of paddy fields all over; paddy, paddy, and still more paddy in any direction you look; fields have morphed into Goddess Lakshmi’s nursery now; aroma of the new paddy is wafting across stealthily; whitish paddy-corns are playing peek-

a-boo jutting out of green paddy blades. Field-puja has started—Puja for *Garbha Shashthi* (Goddess of Fertility). In the northeast corner of the field, the head farmer offers flowers, sweets, and *Ganga Jal* to *Garbha Shashthi*. The prayer could not be simpler—May Goddess Lakshmi’s blessings flood our markets, homes, and fields. The farmer keeps dreaming about the golden paddy crop.

In the month of *Ashwin* (mid-September to mid-October), the farmers start grouting long bamboo sticks, four cubits long, into the ground. The colour of the field changes rapidly from light yellow to golden. Paddy is now a coy bride. Farmer lives on hope. However, the clouds of fear start hovering menacingly in the sky of hope. Because, at this time, field rats would take over the fields without anybody's knowledge. They would take away the paddy silently and store it in the secret burrows.



So, these bamboo perches are fixed to get the owls, the nemesis of the field rats, to perch. Big white Barn Owls. They would guard the fields. If the owl does not visit the fields, the farmer would be ruined.

After harvesting in *Poush* (mid-December to mid-January), an unrelenting barrenness hits the fields. Here and there paddy plant stubs remain like stubbles on an unshaved face. A particular flock of small birds arrives from nowhere and occupies the field. A constant chirping sound permeates the air.

They make these paddy stubs their home. Throughout the day, they would move from field to field pecking the paddy seeds. They would scoot from the field on hearing human footsteps. In village parlance, these birds are called "*Lara Ghurghure* (Stub Wanderers)¹".

The empty fields are now soaked in saffron hues. A herd of cows is grazing and polishing off the grass with their hoof-like tongues. The shepherd takes a passing break. Now all the fields are undeterred. No urgency to herd the cows away from the crop. The shepherd boys play a leisurely game of hopscotch on wet soft fields in the afternoon.

Shallow machines or submersibles had not been introduced yet. Only a few zigzagging lines of green in the heart of the village, twisting and turning like a flowing ragged *Ghaghra*, stop at the *KaNdarer Gaba*². Some men are operating the *Duni*³ drawing water from the '*Mada*' (part of the pond from which water is drawn) of the dying pond. The canoe-shaped ladle of the *Duni* comes down furiously with a hissing sound, spewing out the scooped-up water into the fields or canals.



Now arrive the *Santals* (tribal folks from eastern parts of India) wearing bamboo-woven baskets as makeshift sun hats and carrying *Tangnas* (special pickaxes) on their shoulders. They keep digging across the fields. Experts can talk about how many types of rats there are, but we have seen two types; House Rats and Field Rats. However, both types of rats change places as needed.

For example, the field rats move homeward after paddy is harvested. These are pretty big rats.

¹ Bengal Bush Larks

² KaNdar is a drying river or creak. Gaba is a womb

³ A manually operated contraption to draw water from a reservoir and take it to the fields or feeder-canals. It has a canoe-shaped ladle to scoop out the water that is foot-operated

Again in *Ashwin-Kartik* (October-November), house rats move toward the fields. At that time, tilled fields become their sojourn. It is said that an enterprising rat can get up to seven wives in *Poush* (December).

When the paddy ripens and turns golden brown, the rat army stealthily cuts the paddy corns and stores them in their burrows. They are masters in deceiving the farmer. Even the most experienced farmer would not know their whereabouts in the fields. The rat's predators, the venomous snakes are hibernating. So, does the rat army need to fear anyone?

Santals know their rats. They first rummage through the ground looking for rat holes. Suddenly a hole may catch their eye that you and I cannot ever guess that rats would be living there. The excavation work kicks off to unearth the underground network, built by the rats. Each rat hole meanders for around ten cubits before it ends—you will be amazed to see the exposed burrows.

Secret treasures neatly stacked in layers of ripe paddy corn. It is an amazing stealth art. Paddy corn is arranged like a feminine hand covered with bangles—like a field girl's golden bracelet. Since *Ashwin* (October), Lord Ganesh's godsons⁴ have been looting the farmers' paddy. This is the total accumulated loot.

It is not for nothing that farmers worship Owl (Goddess Lakshmi's *Vahan*) in place of the Goddess.

|| Two ||

Much has been lost from rural Bengal today. Mango orchards and bamboo groves, mud houses are disappearing. The village is now desperate to shed its old skin in the face of urbanisation. As a result, many things are changing rapidly. The environment of the village is also changing. Traditional farming is disappearing. The power of the machine has increased. Agri-land fauna is facing extinction today due to the excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. As a result, rodent infestation in the field has also decreased. Thus *Lakshmi PyaNcha* (Barn Owl) is rarely seen these days.

In addition to the loss, indifference, and neglect are slowly consuming the rural people. Birds are the closest neighbours of man. A diverse ring of bird life comprising crows, cuckoos, sparrows, weaver birds, pigeons, mynahs, parakeets etc., surrounds us. How many people are interested in them? Trees are being cut. Bird habitat is under pressure. Earlier, when the mud house was made, the householder placed a pitcher on the wall at the top and made it a dwelling place for the pigeons. Planting trees was a significant part of folk traditions. Those values are almost extinct now.

It is difficult to find palm trees laden with weaver-bird nests in villages today. The sparrow population has dwindled around human settlements. So have the vultures. Thoughtless felling of large trees resulted in the loss of dwellings for parakeets. If this is the fate of commoner birds, the plight of the owls is well imaginable.

⁴ Mouse/Rat is Lord Ganesh's vahan (vehicle)

The owl is a wonder amongst birds. Owls, except the Barn Owl (*Lakshmi PyaNcha*), are strictly forbidden from entering the village. If Brown Fish Owls (*Hutum PyaNcha*) or Brown Hawk Owls (*kalpyaNcha*) come to the area, villagers do not rest till they are chased away. If these owls visit a villager's home, that's a terribly bad omen. *Ulook* is another name for owl. Rigveda 10.164.4 *sukta* proclaims *Ulook's* call as indecent. Haricharan Banerjee mentions *Ulook* as *Hutum PyaNcha* in the Bengali Dictionary.

However, not only from the point of view of the entire avian family the owl is an important bird, but the overall biological characteristics of the bird have become a salient element of folk culture, literature, religion, and philosophy.

First, the owl is a strange bird. Jogindranath Sarkar wrote about the physical characteristics of owls-

Goddess Lakshmi's guard with a knife in his mouth and a fishing hook on his feet.
Looking at the shape of the face and eyes, it does not seem to be a bird.

[ঠোটে ঝুরি পায়ে বঁড়শি লক্ষ্মীদেবীর রক্ষী।
চোখে মুখের গড়ন দেখে মনে হয় না পক্ষি।।]

Owls have spherical eyes and horn-like ears. A strange-looking bird.

Secondly, the calls of different species of owls are so unique and full of characteristics that humans have often found them terrifying. When a *Hutum PyaNcha* (Brown Fish Owl) calls in the middle of the night from the trees off the field, it drills a strange feeling of unknown apprehension into people's minds.

Third, it is a nocturnal bird which is stone-blind during the day. The owl can rotate its head as much as 360 degrees. As a result, it has a perfect hind vision.

Fourth, there are more than 200 species of owls around the world. We have 25 species in Bengal. Among them, the white *Lakshmi PyaNcha* (Barn Owl) is most loved by Bengalis. The owl is a beauty to behold. The face is essentially white with a human heart shape. A slight grey or saffron tint adds to the beauty of the *Lakshmi PyaNcha*.



Fifth, the owl's rat hunting is legendary. As per experts, a pair of owls can hunt around 3,000 rats a year. Due to this, the farmer's friend *Lakshmi PyaNcha* has become the vahan aka symbol of Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of paddy.

The owl is a bird which has found its place in almost all cultures of the world. Its role in mythology, folklore, legends, and folk culture is remarkable. Even today in rural Bengal, a person with a flat nose is derisively called *PyaNcha* or *PeNchi*. The position of any object outside a right angle (*Samakon*) is said to be in a *pyaNchakon* (obtuse angle). The day-blind owl's ability to hide has been compared to wisdom and wise in religious philosophy. Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, therefore, has an

owl in her hand. Again, the journey of moving from worldly desires, temptations, and illusions to a path of meditation with a focused mind is proclaimed as “Pechak Britti” in religious philosophy. Many myths have been created around the owl. Sometimes it symbolises wisdom or patience, sometimes death. In Hindu scriptures, he is considered to be the son of *Yama* (God of death).

The owl was the totem of many nations in ancient times. Kshitimohan Sen, in his book “*Jatibhed*,” collected several human names from the *Mahabharata* and showed that they are derived from the names of animals, plants, and birds such as owl, crow, wood-apple, fox, donkey, palm, teak, bamboo, etc. A famous sage in Vedic literature was *Kaushik* which means owl.

Several writers in Bengali literature have used different species of owls as pseudonyms, such as “*HutompyaNcha*” for Sri Kaliprasanna Singha. His famous book is “*Hutom PyaNchar Naksha*.” The significance of the book is reflected in the pseudonym itself. Renowned researcher Vinay Ghosh used to write under the name “*KalpyaNcha*”. In the poetry of Jibanananda Das, the owl is a symbol of humanity winning the struggle of life. Many will remember the blind owl in the poem ‘*Eight years ago*’.

তবু রোজ রাতে আমি চেয়ে দেখি, আহা,
ধূরধূরে অন্ধ পেঁচা অস্থত্থের ডালে ব'সে এসে
চোখ পাল্টায়ে কয়: ‘বুড়ি চাঁদ গেছে বুঝি বেনোজলে ভেসে?
চমৎকার!
ধরা যাক দু-একটা ইঁদুর এবার—’

Yet every night I look, aha,
The blind owl screeched and sat on the fig tree branch
It rolls its eyes and says: ‘Old Moon is swept away by flood waters
Excellent!
Let’s catch a mouse or two now—’

|| Three ||

Lakshmi’s connection with the owl, via the mouse, is an incident of recent times. Before going into that topic, it is very important to shed some light on which deity was first associated with the owl. As mentioned earlier, owls are commonly called *Ulook Pakshis* and the bird’s voice is said to be very inauspicious in Vedic literature. The most interesting fact is that *Ulook* or *Hutompecha* is the *vahan* of *Dharmaraja* and he is hailed as *Ulook Muni* in *Dharmamangal*.

The state poetry of *Rarh*⁵ is *Dharmamangal Kavya*. *Dharmaraja* is one of the oldest folk deities. However, researchers have noted shades of other deities including the Vedic *Varuna* (wind God), the Sun God, the mythological *Yama* (God of death), and even *Vishnu* in *Dharmaraja*. Haraprasad Shastri discussed the influence of Buddhism in *Dharmaraja*. In the origin of the universe section of Ramai Pandit’s *Shunyapuran*, *Dharmaraja* is the epitome of ancient culture.

⁵ Rarh - part of West Bengal in the western bank of Bhagirathi river

It is written in *Shunyapuran* - there was nothing anywhere before the creation of the universe. Neither cattle, gods, beasts, nor water or land. Emptiness pervaded everywhere. *Pawan* (wind) was born in that void by the Lord's will. *Anil* and *Niranjana* were born to *Pawan*. *Niranjana* remained absorbed in *Sadhana* (religious austerities) for fourteen years. One day he let out a big yawn and *Ulookpakshi* (owl) was born from that yawn. *Ulookpakshi* started flying into that huge void. At *Niranjana's* command, *Ulookpakshi* sat next to him. *Ulook* is not only *Niranjana's* vahan, he is "*Ulook Muni*" too. In the words of *Ulook*, *Niranjana* started to create components of the world one by one. It is written in *Shunyapuran* -

চৌদ্দযুগ বই পরভু তুলিলেন হাই।
উর্ধ নিশ্বাসে জন্মিলেন পক্ষ উল্লুকাই।।
জনমিয়া উল্লুক পক্ষ উড়িয়াত জাএ।
শুন্যে বৈসি নিরঞ্জন দেখিবারে পাএ।।

After fourteen aeons, the lord lets out a yawn
Ulook was born from that exhale
After birth, Ulook flies up and away
And watched Niranjana from up above

Just as *Ulook* or *Hutum pyaNcha* became the vahan of *Niranjana Dharmanaraj*, *Lakshmi PyaNcha* became so of Goddess *Lakshmi*. Paddy was not associated with *Lakshmi* in the earlier era. *Lakshmi* was basically the water goddess *Apsara*. She was closely associated with the sea and marine treasures. With this connection, she came to be known as the Goddess of Wealth or *Nidhi*. Later, when *Lakshmi* became the goddess of paddy, her association with the peasant's friend, the mouse-eating owl, became inevitable. Before delving into the subject in detail, some discussion is needed about earlier vahan of Goddess *Lakshmi's*.

Deer, peacock, lion, and duck were associated with *Lakshmi* in ancient literature, sculptures, and coins. *Lakshmi* herself is said to be the golden deer in verse 71, the second stanza of the *Rigveda*.

-হিরণ্যবর্ণাং হরিণীং সুবর্ণরজতস্বজাম।
চন্দ্রাং হিরন্ময়ীং লক্ষ্মীং জাতবেদো মমাবহ।।'

Lakshmi's complexion is like gold, adorned with gold and silver ornaments. She is also hailed as a golden deer. Kunindaraj Amoghahuti's coin has deer in front of *Lakshmi*. *Lakshmi* devi feeding a peacock on a Kumargupta coin. *Lakshmi* is riding a lion on the gold coin of Chandragupta II. King of Gaur (*Gaudadhipati*) Shashanka's coin has a duck at *Lakshmi's* feet. So it can be confirmed by historical pieces of evidence that the owl, *Lakshmi's* vahan, did not get a permanent seat until at least the 7th century. It has been said earlier that the owl has become *Lakshmi's* vahan from the day Paddy's connection with *Lakshmi* became strong.

No precise information is available about when exactly paddy cultivation started in Bengal. However, ancient examples of rice have been found from the earliest layers of Panduraja's mound in Burdwan, a contemporary of the Harappan civilisation. An ancient rice goddess has also been found in an ancient terracotta statue from Chandraketurgh. Historian Bratindranath Mukhopadhyay wrote - On a circular panel, a woman in Hellenic dress stands with a rice ear (ear of paddy corn) in her hand.

In the Brahmi inscription on a plaque, the goddess is described as “paddy victor”. According to Dr Mukhopadhyay, she is the ‘paddy goddess’ but not the Lakshmi of the Brahminic faith. (Lōkaśilpa banām uchcha mārgīya śilpa pg-41). So ever since the goddess of paddy transformed into Lakshmi, the owl came to be associated with Lakshmi.

However, there seems to be another argument. Mythical Lakshmi is known as the wife of Vishnu or Narayan. Vishnu’s *vahan Garuda*⁶ is a mythical bird with many similarities to the owl. If seen in this way, *Lakshmi’s vahan pyaNcha* (owl) has evolved from Vishnu’s *vahan Garuda*. Incidentally, *Garuda* is seen at the feet of Lakshmi in the cave paintings of Ellora. On Maghi Purnima (The full moon night of January) in East Bengali tradition where the Lakshmi- Narayan idol is worshipped, *Garuda* is seen at Narayan’s feet and *pyaNcha* at Lakshmi’s feet as well.



There is another folktale about Lakshmi’s *vahan*. The final allocation of vahans to gods and goddesses was not done yet. Once all the gods came to the earth. They began to wander around on foot. Seeing the procession of the gods, the animals and birds came and said “We will go around with you. Please ride on our backs.” The Gods chose *vahans* according to their choice. But there was a problem with Lakshmi. Everyone wanted to be Lakshmi’s *vahan*. Lakshmi was in trouble. In the end, she said knowingly - I will come to earth someday. The one who waits for me on that day will be my *vahan*. Everyone said, “so be it.”

Lakshmi came to earth on a dark night of new moon in the month of *Kartik* (October-November). She did not find anyone waiting for her. Only the owl was awake. Then Goddess Lakshmi appointed the owl as her *vahan*. And that owl came to be known as “*Lakshmi PyaNcha*” (Barn Owl). From the story, it is understood that the *vahan*-deity pairing is not very ancient and the owl becoming a *vahan* of Lakshmi’s is a much more recent event.

|| Four ||

At present, *Lakshmi PyaNcha* means Lakshmi, the goddess of crops. The owl is worshipped as a symbol of the goddess. Apart from the *Kojagari Purnima*⁷, Lakshmi Puja is officially celebrated three times a year on *Chaiti Sankranti*⁸, *Paush Sankranti*⁹, and the Thursday of *Shukla Paksha*¹⁰ in the *Bhadra*¹¹ month (August-September). Although it is called Lakshmi Puja, it is actually the *Lakshmi PyaNcha* that is worshipped. During the Puja, the Thakur Ghar (worship room) or Bhandar Ghar (pantry room) is beautified and decorated with *Alpana*¹². Twenty-one ears of paddy corn are taken out of Lakshmi’s haNra (a large earthen pitcher or pot) and arranged in a square shape on a

6 Garuda, the mythical bird, is widely accepted as the forefather of present day raptors

7 Full Moon night of October

8 Last day of Bengali month Chaitra(Mid-April). Also last day of the Bengali year

9 Last day of Bengali month Paush(Mid January). Also coinciding with Uttarayan(Sun moving to northern hemisphere)

10 Rising moon fortnight

11 A Bengali month

12 South Asian folk art style, traditionally practiced by women, and consisting of coloured motifs, patterns, and symbols that are painted on floors and walls with paints made from rice flour, on religious occasions



designated altar. As a symbol of the goddess, only a *katha* (small basket) made of cane is placed facing forward in the middle of the pile of paddy corn. A red *Cheli* (veil) is wrapped around the *Katha*. Space around is decorated with cowries, *jhinuks* (sea shells), *sindur kouto* (vermilion pot), etc. Several owl statuettes made of wood are placed in the gaps.

Secondly, the village girls draw a picture of a wonderful ecosystem on a 2x2 foot square mud-covered central spot in front of the *Dhanyagar gola*¹³. The *Thakur-Thakrun* (God n Goddess) of ancient times became embodied in the *Alpana* made of *Pituligola*¹⁴. All around are ears of paddy corn. Owl and Lakshmi's footprints. Moon, sun, plants, birds, and swastikas are drawn. Every picture becomes bright with vermilion drops. This *Thakur-Thakrun* is called Lakshmi- Narayan. In this picture too, *Lakshmi PyaNcha* is in its full glory.

Thirdly, all these alpanas, especially during *Paushparban*¹⁵ or Lakshmi Puja, have Lakshmi's footprints, lotus, *avartadhara*¹⁶ as well as owl motifs.



Courtesy Goddess Lakshmi, a rich wood-carving industry (*Darushilpa*) was born out of *PyaNcha* Puja at Notungram in East Bardhaman district. *Lakshmi PyaNcha* of various shapes, made of wood is the traditional art of Natungram craft. Apart from this, dancing *Gaur-Nitai*

with raised hands, *Raja-Rani*, *Bou Putul* (bride doll) statuettes are also made. Traditional doll-making is a round-the-year activity in Notungram. The three-, four-, six- and ten-inch-long owl owl statuettes are in demand around the year all over Bengal.

¹³ Barn for storing the paddy

¹⁴ White paint made with rice flour and water

¹⁵ Poush(December-January) is the month for delicious food like pithe-puli, patisapta, soru-chakli and the month for Poushparbon

¹⁶ A clockwise spiral ring motif

There are two types of owls—wingless and winged owls. Buyers from areas like Triveni, Khagra, Dakshineswar, Kalighat, Barrabazar, etc., buy the owls in bulk. For the information of those who feel pleased about buying authentic Kalighat dolls, the association of Kalighat with these dolls is purely commercial. Many artists from this region camp in Kalighat because the sale would be good in religious places. As did the *Potuas*¹⁷ in the past. That's why the *putuls* (dolls) of Notungram were named like the Kalighat *pots* (scrolls) - Kalighat *putuls*.

Different types of softwood are used to make owls or other dolls, such as *Amra*, *Sonajhuri*, *Pitali*, *Gamar* etc. Putul (doll) making is an entire household work, with hammering etc done by the male members, while women and children help in scrubbing, polishing and painting. Finally, a delicate stroke of the brush draws eyebrows shaped like a split bamboo leaf and a pair of sleepy eyes take shape. At present, small and big owls of Notungram have become household puja-room décor items, mandap decorations, showpieces, and house decoration items. And thus a cottage industry that emerged banking on the significance of Owl worship continues to sustain and widen the relevance of Owls across every household in Bengal.

¹⁷ The Potuas are an artisan community of West Bengal. They do scroll paintings that were traditionally used as a storytelling aid

Dr. Thakur is a teacher, writer, researcher, and the founder-editor of Koulal, a print and online magazine that chronicles the Literature, History, and Culture of undivided Bengal (<https://koulalpotrika.com/>). As a teacher and researcher, he has extensively explored the 'Rarh' region of Bengal. For his contributions and research, he has been bestowed with many awards and felicitations from several institutes such as Kolkata Pranay-Memorial Award, Nabadwip Archeological Council, Calcutta Little Magazine Library and Research Centre.

IMMORTAL OWLS

Dr. Sukanya Datta

Immortality is continued existence. Owls being living creatures cannot hope for immortality. Or can they?

Owls get their first lease of immortality when they become enshrined in writings that capture the imagination of generations of readers who take their names with undiluted emotion. The author passes away. The readers close their last book. Yet, the owl...the owl never dies. It is in this way that the literary-owl transcends its mortality.

However, the question is...have owls been that fortunate? Aren't owls, being nocturnal, often regarded as harbingers of darkness? Isn't a species of owl in Bengal called *Kaalpyacha*-the owl of death? Which author would choose to glorify owls when they have the entire aviary of Noah's Ark to choose from. Peacocks and Birds of Paradise for example?

Well, authors around the world have written about owls or created owlsh characters and even adopted an owl's name as a pseudonym. When Bengali social-commentator Kaliprasanna Sinha penned his epic portrayal of 18th century *babudom*, he named it *Hutum Pyachar Naksha* (Sketches by an Owl) --not just any owl but the Indian Eagle-owl (*Bubo bengalensis*) known as *Hutum Pyacha* in Bangla!

The tradition continues. Sukumar Ray's time defying nonsense rhymes in Bangla includes *Pyacha koi Pyachani*; *Khasha tor Chechani*. (roughly meaning Mr Owl tells Mrs Owl, your screeching is lovely). Being birds of a feather, Edward Lear, another famous writer of nonsense poems too wrote about The Owl and the Pussy-cat who went to sea ...*"In a beautiful pea-green boat; They took some honey, and plenty of money; Wrapped up in a five-pound note."*

When the child reading these rhymes graduates to reading Jibananda Das, it comes as no surprise when the *Lokkhi pyacha* (Barn Owl; *Tyto alba*) shows up repeatedly. *Lokkhi* is Lakshmi-the Goddess of Prosperity always depicted with a sheaf of grains and an owl at her feet. The Barn Owl's divine association is courtesy its diet of rodents that deplete a farmer's granary. Divine connection can be seen in Greek mythology too. The Grain-Goddess Demeter punished tell-tale Ascalaphus by transforming him into a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*).

Poets have associated the owl with mournfulness; perhaps because of the way its calls echo at dusk over a lonely landscape. In his poem, *Ode to Melancholy*, John Keats associated the "...downy owl" with just such an emotion.

However, these are generic mentions of owls. The more famous owls are those to whom the authors granted a personality and crowned with a name.

The most famous of the modern owl characters is Hedwig a Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) from the tales of Harry Potter. Hedwig in good owlsh company throughout. Draco Malfoy owns an Eagle

Owl which, most likely, is *Bubo bubo*. Errol, the poor little overworked owl of the Weasley family is a Great Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*). Pigwidgeon, Ron Weasley's pet and likely, a Scops Owl. (*Otus scops*). Then, there is Hermes, a Screech Owl (*Megascops sp.*). There were quite a few other owls mentioned by name in these books and they are not alone.

In Chronicles of Narnia written by the British author C. S. Lewis, a white (Snow?) owl named Glimfeather plays a prominent role.

Guardians of Ga'Hoole is a fantasy series written by American author Kathryn Lasky. The animated-movies follow the adventures of Barn Owl Soren, who lived with his parents Noctus and Marella and siblings, Kludd and Eglantine. His mate is Pellimore; mother to Bell, Blythe, and Sebastiana. Other named owls in this series include: Gylfie- an Elf Owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*), Twilight-a Great Grey Owl; Digger-a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*); Primrose-a Northern Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium californicum*); Otulissa-a Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*); Martin- a Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*); Ruby-a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*); Bubo-a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*); Silver- a Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*); NutBeam-an Australian Masked Owl (*Tyto novaehollandiae*); Fritha-an Eurasian Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*); and Ork-a Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*). The author is clearly a strigiformesphile! But she isn't the only one in the literary world.

English author A. A. Milne who wrote the timeless classic Winnie-the-Pooh stories included an anthropomorphic 'wise owl' named OWL who is a bit of a scatterbrain! Andy Runton creator of Owly; an American graphic novel series featured a gentle owl named Owly. In the Animals of Farthing Wood, Colin Dann created a rather cynical Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*) character whose mate is called Holly.

Owls are associated with the night. Can you imagine an owl that is terrified of the dark? Well, a baby Barn Owl called Plop, was afraid of the dark and Jill Tomlinson wrote about this scared little owlet and the ways in which Plop conquered fear.

From books to movies is just a flap of a wing away. The animated fantasy film, Happily Ever After, showcased Scowl- the sarcastic owl. Interestingly, O RLY?-an online icon, is represented as an image macro of a Snowy Owl. O RLY? is the abbreviation of Oh, really and is used in online forums in a sarcastic manner.

The purple owl-puppet Mr. Know-It-Owl of Mr. Know-It-Owl's Video School is more genial. This owl wears yellowish circular glasses and lives inside a hollow-tree with a well-stocked bookcase.

Sesame Street is a popular American educational children's television series of long standing. It represents Hoots the Owl as a saxophone-playing jazz musician performing at Birdland, the Jazz-club. Athena is Hoot's granddaughter and the association is with Athena, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom and warfare. In turn, this has an interesting connection with The Defence Services Staff College of India. The crest of the College is a wise Owl perched on crossed swords. Earlier, its motto used to be Tam Marte Quam Minerva (Both Mars and Minerva...with Mars standing for war and Minerva/Athena for wisdom). Today, the motto is in Sanskrit; *Yuddham Pragya* (To war with wisdom).

Being associated with institutes is one way of becoming immortal no doubt. Having a tagline also helps. Woodsy Owl, the mascot of US Forest Service often says, “Give a Hoot; Don’t Pollut (e) !

Mascots of sporting events often become celebrities as did the Snowy Owls Sukki, Nokki, Lekki and Tsukki; the quartet at the 1998 Winter Olympics. They individually represented fire, air, earth and water respectively and together, they represented the four major islands of Japan.

In 2013, the owls named Shwe Yoe and Ma Moe were chosen as mascots of the Southeast Asian Games because in Myanmar, paired owls are considered to bring good luck.

In 2018, the University of Coimbra (Portugal) created DUC-the owl (acronym of Desporto Universitário em Coimbra) as the official mascot of the European Universities Games. Inspiration was drawn from Minerva’s owl that appears on the University’s insignia. Similarly, the Doyle Owl is the (unofficial) mascot of Reed College (USA). Amusingly, it is tradition for groups of students to officially “steal” it and later, display it at a “showing” after taking precautions that rival groups do not make off with it. Since it is made of concrete it has been given the Latin name *Strigidus cementus*.

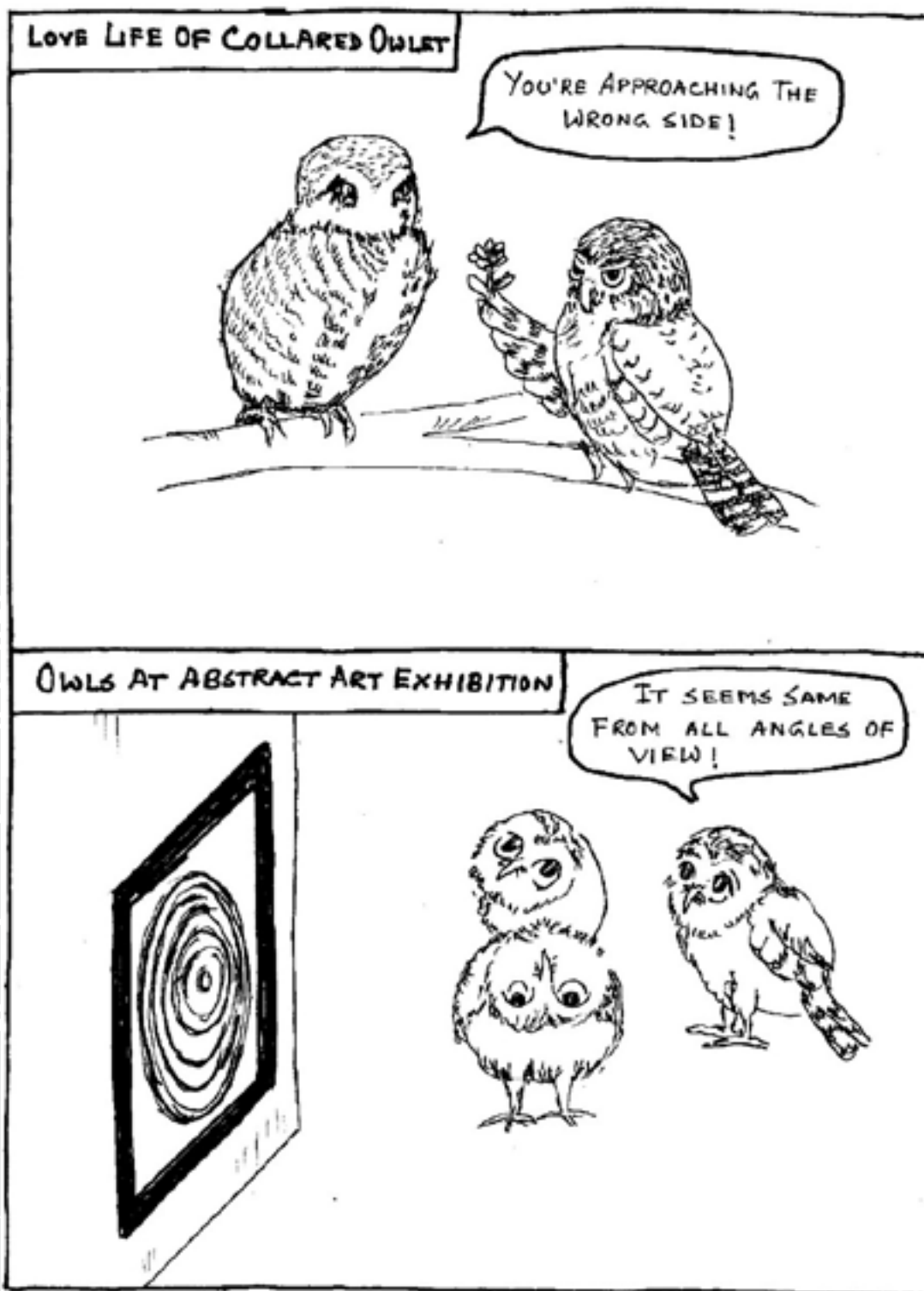
Book, Movies, TV-series, Sports mascots, College insignias and crests...pre-dating all these, and perhaps sounding the clarion call for the immortality of owls, is the prehistoric (between 33,000-30,000 years) art found in the Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc Cave (France). The painting of a Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) is stunningly simple yet brilliant. The owl’s head faces the front but its body is seen from the back. The perspective that the prehistoric artist achieved highlights an owl’s ability to turn its head a full 180 degrees. It captured the imagination of our extremely distant ancestors and our collective gasp of admiration and appreciation today has guaranteed immortality for the owl.

Yet, books and movies lose popularity. Memories of events fade. Paintings crumble. Public attention is fickle. Better by far to associate the owl’s name with geographical features that can last for millennia. Immortal by comparison to human lives are places such as The Owl Mountains- in Poland. Coincidentally, or not, it includes a protected area called Owl Mountains Landscape Park. The similarly-named Owl Creek Mountains are in USA. Canada boasts of two rivers named Owl Rivers. As long as these flow, the owls are immortal.

However, the truly immortal are those that hold the human mind in thrall. Here too, an owl holds centre-stage. In 1993, Paul Régis Hauser French writer, puzzle designer, and creator of numerous treasure hunts, adopted the pseudonym Max Valentin and published a book named *Sur La Trace de La Chouette d’Or* (The Hunt for The Golden Owl). In it, he detailed eleven (plus one) enigmas that need to be solved in order to locate a hidden owl sculpture in mainland France. The Prize? Glory. Plus, an owl crafted in Gold and Silver. Till the time of writing this, the prize remains unclaimed.

The owl is not only immortal; it is still greatly sought after.

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.



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.



Brown Boobook



Oriental Bay Owl



Brown Fish Owl



Brown Wood Owl



Spot-bellied Eagle Owl



Barn Owl



Collared Owlet_Rufous Morph



Collared Owlet



Dusky Eagle Owl



Eurasian Scops Owl



Jungle Owlet



Short-eared Owl



Long-eared Owl





Collared Scops Owl



Oriental Scops Owl



Mountain-Scops owl



Asian Barred Owlet



Spotted Owlets



Buffy Fish Owl



Eastern-grass Owl



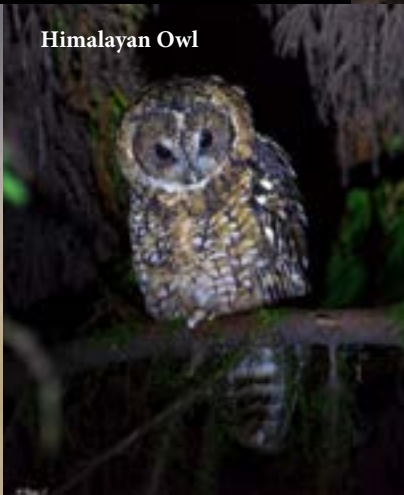
Tawny Fish Owl



Indian Scops Owl



Little Owl



Himalayan Owl



Indian Eagle-Owl

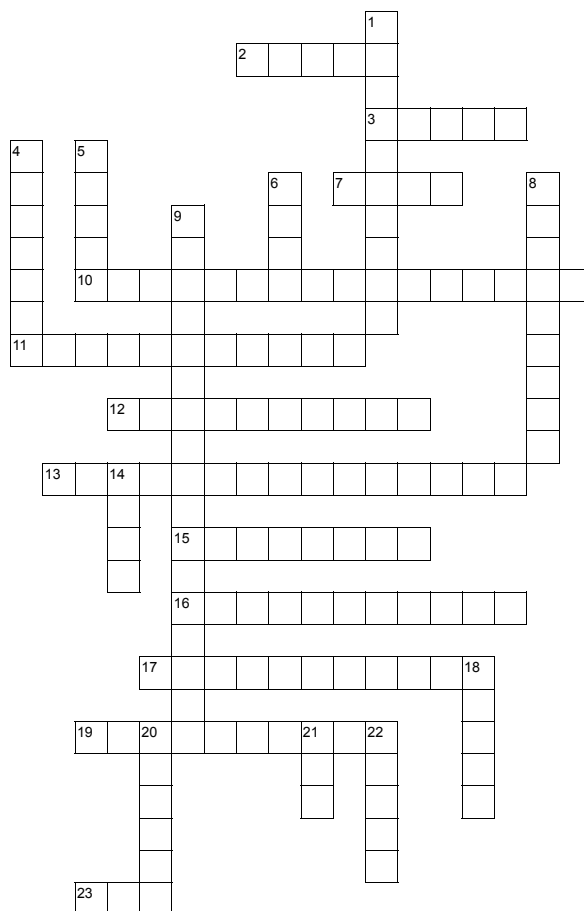


Mottled-wood Owl

West Bengal Owls

OWL NAME	CONTRIBUTORS
Brown Hawk Owl (Brown Boobook)	Navin Aggarwal: An avid Birder, nature lover and photography enthusiast. Have started birding since May 2021 in Covid 2nd Wave.
Barn Owl	
Brown Fish-Owl	
Spotted Owlet	
Oriental Bay Owl	Sandip Das: Loves watching birds and documenting their vocalisations as well. Never misses an opportunity to explore new places.
Eastern Grass Owl	
Mountain Scops Owl	
Collared Owlet	
Rufous Morph	Sandeep Chakrabarty : Along with bird photography, cycling is his another passion. Also involved in nature tourism.
Tawny Fish Owl	Sujan Chatterjee: Secretary of BWS, a naturalist, avid and experienced birder and conservationist.
Dusky Eagle Owl	Soumya Kundu: Loves to explore the wilderness. He has a keen interest in birds and trees.
Long-eared Owl	Sankha Mishra: Professionally a data analyst for a MNC with a deep interest in wildlife, especially in Birds of Prey.
Mottled Wood Owl	Biswajit Singha: An employee of WBSEDCL Loves to know and photograph wild life and with my limited ability, try to save them.
Himalayan Wood Owl	Arnab Roychoudhury: Nature and wildlife his passion. He has been observing these winged creatures in pursuit of happiness and already has seen 500+ bird species.
Brown Wood Owl	Malay Ghosh: A MBA in Sales & Marketing who left his job to get fully engaged in Acting and Dubbing. His passion, hobby and main interest is Birds & Wildlife.
Collared Scops Owl	Santanu Manna: A teacher by profession and a birder by passion, who likes to teach Chemistry.
Eurasian Scops Owl	Sukanta Kundu: Working in MNC as Head of Operations, East. Photography is his passion since early age, now converted into wildlife photography, started my wildlife journey from 2020.
Buffy Fish Owl	Chiranjib Dutta: A gynaecologist by profession, and passionate birder. Birding and bird photography keeps me ticking through all the professional stresses.
Asian Barred Owlet	
Spot-bellied Eagle-Owl	Priyam Chattopadhyay: An IT Professional and an avid birdwatcher with an interest in exploring a varied range of habitats for different species of birds.
Indian Eagle Owl	
Jungle Owlet	
Indian Scops Owl	
Oriental Scops Owl	Abhishek Gupta: An officer of the Indian Police Service, aiming to learn about and from nature, through birds.
Short-eared Owl	Ronit Dutta: An avid birdwatcher and photographer of the avian world with over 13 years of being a bird wanderer. Engineer by profession but more interesting in the engineering of birds.
Little Owl	

Owl Crossword



Across

- 2 The owl that is Quebec's national bird (5)
- 3 Baby Owl (5)
- 7 Opposite to owl-personalities; also named after a bird (4)
- 10 Smallest owl in Europe (8,5,3)
- 11 Stone Name of Unique Aboriginal standing stone near Perth (8,3,5)
- 12 Continent with no owls (10)
- 13 Ancient Mesopotamian Goddess riding lions, flanked by owls (5,2,3,5)
- 15 Number of neck vertebrae in owls (8)
- 16 Playwright who described the owl as "Fatal bellman?" (11)
- 17 Fictional criminal organization in DC Comics, adversaries of Batman (5,2,3)
- 19 Collective noun for owls (10)
- 23 Domestic mammal namesake of Long-eared Owl (3)

Down

- 1 Description of owl feet (10)
- 4 The Barking Owl is also known as the -----Owl (7)
- 5 "Alone and warming his five wits, the -----owl in the belfry sits." A colour (5)
- 6 Country where the fossil of the largest-ever owl was found (4)
- 8 Owls symbolise wisdom. A synonym with the word wisdom OWL in it (9)
- 9 Owl Emperor of the Night (9,4,3)
- 14 Modern currency accepted by multiple countries displays an owl (4)
- 18 The only Burrowing Owl found in Aruba-its national symbol (5)
- 20 Pokemon owl (6)
- 21 Smallest owl in the world (3)
- 22 Ferocious mammal namesake of the Great Horned Owl (5)



STORIES ABOUT OWL CHARACTERISTICS

Souvik Roychoudhury

Among all birds, Owls are the closest to my heart. Like many birders, I am also fascinated by these wonderful creatures of mother nature and aspire to observe any many of them as possible (till now, the count is 27). Here are some stories from my encounters with Owls.

EYE COLOR

During the Thattekad, Kerala trip in January 2020, we found a Scops Owl high on a distant tree. Owl's body was not clearly seen. Two theories emerged – it was either Indian Scops Owl or Oriental Scops Owl. One key differentiating factor was eye colour. However, the Owl's eyes were closed. There started a long wait for the bird to open its eyes. A few members claimed they saw it opening but couldn't show the picture. Just when we were about to give up, it finally opened its eyes, and it was dark. The Indian Scops Owl camp roared with victory in judging the correct ID.

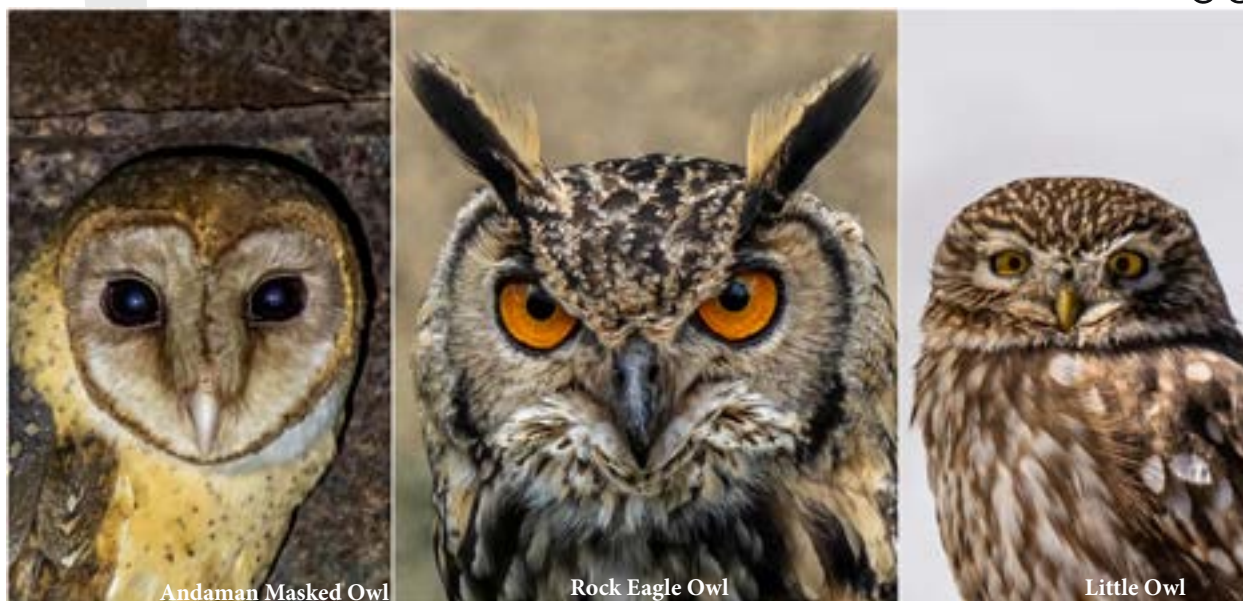
Owl eye colour is a key characteristic that tells a lot about when the bird is active. If the colour is black or dark brown, like Andaman Masked Owl, it is entirely nocturnal and hunts only in total darkness. If the eye colour is orange like Rock Eagle Owl, it is crepuscular and hunts in dawn & dusk in low light. Finally, if the eye colour is yellow like Little Owl, it can be active in the daytime under full sunlight.



Indian Scops Owl

The eye colour doesn't make it exclusive when it hunts but shows the time when it generally does. Also, the colours vary between Owl species. Like in our story of Indian Scops Owl, the colour was dark orange.

Finally, just because Owls can see in the dark doesn't mean they can't see in the light. Their vision is generally much superior to human eyesight. Owl's eye weighs around 5% of bodyweight while it is less than 0.001% for us which explains the difference.



CALL

On January 2021, we were “Owling” at Dehing Patkai NP, Assam. The night was cold and dark. We heard calls of Mountain Scops Owl from the roadside and started tracing the source. The Owl, so typical of mountain Scops, was calling without a break. I recorded the call for 5+ minutes. Finally, we zoned an area where the call was loudest. Then we needed to decide which tree it was coming from. The guide cautioned it had a habit of flying away once we switched on the light. So, we needed to accurately decide which tree it was perching. We were confident it was from a nearby tree where the branch was lower, while our guide (who was the expert) said it was the tree behind and at a specific elevation. But tracing the call, we were sure it was the tree closer to us. Majority won, and we asked the guide to focus the torch on the tree closer to us, which he did. To our disappointment, the bird flew from the tree behind which the guide had guessed. Our guide then told what we were hearing was the echo of the call. Often Mountain Scops Owl makes the call towards the ground, and we hear the echo and get confused about the location. Lessons learned (i.e., listen to the experts) but at a price.



Two & half years later, in November 2022, we were in Manila, Uttarakhand, searching for the same bird. Once again, I was sure the bird was on a nearby tree this time while the guide pointed to the tree behind! Without debating I followed the guide’s advice and got a decent picture of the bird.

One more story from the same trip involved a brown wood Owl. We heard its call from our resort at Pangot, Uttarakhand, around evening and went out looking for it. We had the company of a “guide” from the resort who had been doing this for over a decade, he claimed. Soon we realized

he wasn't prepared i.e. he didn't carry a good torch and didn't know much about birds beyond the Pangot area. However, what he knew was the birds in that area, and he knew it, undoubtedly sure. Especially about the brown wood Owl. He didn't have the Merlin app but played recordings of so many different calls of brown wood Owl he recorded over the years. He could associate that with their behaviour and age – roosting call, juvenile call, alert call, fight call, mating call etc. We were in deep shock. Then he claimed the bird was making a fight call and would come out in the open area near the road to push its “competitor” out. And that's precisely what happened. The bird came out on the road, perched on an open tree, and continued to make screaming calls even after we left the area. I hope and wish experts collect those calls and use his profound knowledge.

FLYING

Owls are called silent killers - when they fly, they make very little audible noise, if anything. Our building has a Barn Owl pair, which most probably stays on our rooftop. I saw it flying at eye level on many nights. In some cases, it flew within 8-10 ft from our balcony, and I didn't hear a thing. I saw a research video where an Owl was made to fly in a room full of light feathers on the ground, and as it flew over those, not a single feather moved. While it doesn't make much noise, it doesn't create a lot of air turbulence around it.

On June 2022 on Lava - Ladham road, West Bengal, we were waiting for the night to get darker, expecting to hear the call of brown wood Owl and then trace the same. We were sitting on a bench under a tree. I played the call in Merlin to familiarize myself with the sound. And to our huge shock, the Owl called from the tree branch on top of me which was just 8 ft from the road. Three of us were there and none realized when it came! I am sure this happened to many of the readers where the guide announced the Owl had come, but we didn't realize when & where. Similarly, in August 2022 in Bhigwan, Maharashtra saw a family of 4 Mottled Wood Owls flying past us, but there was no sound of its wing flap.



BODYPARTS

Owl body parts are often key pointers in identification like in the case of Scops Owls. When the Eurasian Scops Owl was seen in Rajarhat, West Bengal on October 2021, I went there after others have already taken the picture. I was lucky that a herd of cows was passing by, and the Owl opened its eye fully and watched the cows with a lot of attention. As a result, it was not paying any attention to me, and I could capture a good image of it for some time. I had no idea that point that it would be Eurasian Scops Owl and didn't know what was waiting to make that determination. However, I knew certain body parts like feet, neck, ear area etc., were vital for identification and instead of just taking more facial disc shots, I started capturing those parts. When experts met for identification discussion, I could send those snaps for their reference.

OWLS & CROWS

If crows see an Owl in the open, especially in urban areas where the crow population is high, they



Eurasian Scops Owl

ferociously attack the Owl, often injuring, if not killing, the bird. In Kolkata's Silicon Valley area, Rajarhat, West Bengal, there used to be a large banyan tree where two Spotted Owlets used to reside. Once I was checking that area, and out of curiosity, one of the Owlets came out in the open. Immediately a large flock of crows surrounded it and started attacking. The Owlets continued to look at me and I felt guilty for going there and putting it in harm's way. Interestingly the tree also had several black drongos, and they started repelling the crows and; in a few minutes, I could watch from afar that everything got calm & quiet.

A similar incident happened when a Barn Owl started staying in a covered area on my balcony. Without knowing about its presence, I approached it one day. The Owl flew and sat on a nearby balcony. Immediately a large flock of crows assembled, and they started harassing the Owl. My mother ordered me to protect the Owl, and I spent hours scaring the crows away so the Owl could remain safe on the balcony. The crows gave up after some time.

Finally, in December 2018, we were searching for a rock Eagle Owl in Tal Chappar, Rajasthan. The Owl flew away from a well, and everyone followed it. The above stories came to my mind, and I went out of the bushes and started following the crows to find the Owl in another place. Gave me a good picture.

FOOD HABITS & COEXISTENCE

In my building and nearby trees, several Spotted Owlets and Barn Owls have been happily living for long. I even saw Spot Bellied Eagle Owl, Mountain Scops Owl, Oriental Bay Owl living in the same area in Assam etc. I assume they feed on different food sources and do not contest each other. Interestingly I saw similar-sized Owls happily coexisting in Andamans. In January 2022 at Chidiyatapu, Andamans saw Andaman Hawk Owl and Hume's Hawk Owl in the same/adjacent tree on the same evening and Brown Hawk Owl and Walden's Scops Owl nearby. On the same trip in Kalatang, Andamans saw Andaman Scops Owl and Oriental Scops Owl sharing the same habitat as if they had an unwritten territory separation within them – both Owls were calling from separate trees and didn't change their location during the 2 hrs we spent there.



Hume's Hawk Owl, Andaman Hawk Owl & Oriental Scops (Walden's) Owl

On the contrary, I heard that a Short Eared Owl once came to Dikling Pacheykhani, Sikkim, and it was found dead in an open field the next day. Local resident Spot Bellied Eagle Owl was charged with the murder. Interestingly it didn't eat the dead bird.

Owl's food source varies. Like fish, Owls as their name says, live mostly on fish. I recently saw a collared Scops Owl eat a grasshopper in a West Bengal village. On a trip to Bharatpur Keoladeo Ghana NP, Rajasthan saw a Spotted Owlet with a rodent kill in the early morning. At Bhitarkanika, Odisha, a Barn Owl was seen killing a black drongo, cut its head off and devouring it fully. I have often seen wood Owls prefer areas close to a residence or small locality. My hypothesis is that there is generally food waste in human habitations, which attracts rodents, which is a good meal for Owls. In Mishmi hills, Arunachal Pradesh, the sightings we had of Himalayan Owl were all close to the place we were staying even though the habitat seemed similar far from the locality. As we continue to add more & more images & videos of Owls with a kill, we will learn more about their food habits.



CAMOUFLAGE

Scops Owls like to roost in dense bamboo foliage. In a place called Shyamkhola, West Bengal, many birders have seen and appreciated how well they camouflaged with the surroundings – it's so hard to spot them even though you know it's there and others were pointing towards approximate direction. I had a similar experience with a buffy fish Owl in Sunderbans, West Bengal, in August 2018. Our guide and boatman spotted the Owl and gave a precise location where it was. Still, we could not

differentiate it from the trees as its colours were almost amalgamated with the surroundings where it was hiding. The guide had to almost tell what height from the ground on the given tree I could see it (which I finally did after a lot of embarrassment). Another friend needed to see the picture only to spot it thereafter. One more thing I have noticed with spot-bellied Eagle Owl is when they roost, they sit with their back facing sunlight. It's a silhouette; we generally see a dark object on a tree but can't identify it as a bird until we come close. This happened to me in Munnar, Kerala and Dikling Pacheykhani, Sikkim.

CONCLUSION

As they say, study the bird before the trip, which will help with the sighting and photography, and the same applies to Owls as well. We all have a responsibility to document and share our experience as we observe Owls in nature so that the collective knowledge base increase. We have so much to understand and learn. Like the Long-Eared Owl is seen on the west of India and east of India as it migrates, but not in the Central region. Is it because it doesn't stop, or are we not looking at the right place or time? Recently we saw a sighting of Mottled wood Owl from Purulia, West Bengal, where the habitat is like other places in western India, but it took us these many years to get a second sighting. Was the Eurasian Scops Owl sighting in 2021 in Rajarhat a one-off, or it regularly visits eastern India? We may be ignorant. We will resolve many of these questions as we see and document more and more Owls. I here shared some insights I had and would request the readers to share theirs also in ebird, social sites and other newsletters like this so that, with time we get to know & understand more of these beautiful birds.

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



AN OWL FOR AN OWL- KILLING ONE SPECIES TO SAVE THE OTHER

Rounak Patra

“Hoo-Hoo”- we were startled, as a mysterious dark object flew past our back disappearing in the pine forests surrounding us. In a chilly October evening, four of us stood in the middle of the road surrounded by mountains and a galaxy full of stars, searching for a Himalayan Owl. People relate to owls as these mysterious creatures that rule the night sky, with their hauntingly beautiful rounded eyes and hooting calls. For us birdwatchers out there, owls keep our hobby of birdwatching alive, even after sundown.

Owls are known for their nocturnal adaptations that make them one of the most efficient predators at night. Their incredible sensory adaptation to visual and hearing abilities followed by very low wing-loading (in aerodynamical terms) allows them to fly without making least amount of noise. No doubt, they are such efficient nocturnal predators. However, within all the charisma and sometimes ill omens that owls are associated with, ecologically they are excellent pest controllers, keeping in check the population of vermin.



Barred Owl

As naturalists, people love the idea of observing owls. A major reason being, owls are cryptic species which often go unnoticed in their natural environment. Accordingly, iconic species such as Snowy Owl, Eagle Owl, Long-eared Owl or smaller species such as Scops Owl create a great humdrum among birdwatchers and photographers. But as much as owls are admired, they are equally venerated, despised, associated with witchcrafts, illegal trades and traditional medicines along with the generic causes of habitat destruction. Therefore, success in protecting these species not only depends on anthropogenic issues, but also on social and cultural issues that are deep-rooted in our society.

By this time, if you are still reading, you may have come across a Barn owl in your surrounding or seen pictures of other owls in a forested environment in the internet and may have developed a liking for this particular group of birds. But how much risk are you willing to take to protect these species? Are you willing to stop the cutting of trees and forests to save their home? If your answer is still “Yes”, what if I tell you- “It is still not enough”. What if the cause of the decline of one species of owl is interrelated with that of another very similar species of owl. Simply put, protecting acres of forests is not enough to protect a species of owl. You have to kill one species of owl to bring back the other from the brink of extinction.

This was what exactly happened in the fall of 2013, when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, one of the oldest conservation agencies in the United States of America decided to start an experimental project to kill 3600 Barred Owls in different areas of Washington, Oregon and Northern California in order to save the Spotted Owls! (Barred Owl Removal Project 2013-2019)



Northern Spotted Owl

Harrowing as it sounds, an agitated reaction from the people were evident over such a controversial decision. But what compelled the department to take such a drastic step? Native to the western North America, Mexico and parts of south-western United States, Spotted Owls with a chocolatey to chestnut brown appearance are smaller and prefer living in mature old growth forests of Douglas-fir, Redwood and Oak-Pine to name a few. Barred Owls, on the other hand are adaptable and are able to survive in a wide range of climatic habitats. They are aggressive and feed on almost anything ranging from small invertebrates to rodents and amphibians- a “generalist” habit. In contrast, Spotted Owls are picky eaters who prefer feeding primarily on Northern flying squirrels, Red Tree voles and woodrats. Furthermore, Dr. David Wiens who went on to study these two very similar species as a part of his doctorate found that Barred Owls over 3 breeding seasons combined produced a total of 80 fledglings during 45 breeding attempts at 20 occupied territories as compared to Spotted Owls which gave birth to only 13 fledglings over 21 nesting attempts at 15 occupied territories (Wiens 2012). A clear indication of in areas where their ranges overlapped.

Wildlife biologist Dr. Eric Forsman who had been studying the Spotted Owls over a period of more than 40 years, witnessed the downfall of this species. As the Barred Owls population started increasing in the late 1990s, the Spotted Owl population dropped by more than 80 percent. A recent study by Dr. Alan Franklin also stated that the Northern Spotted Owl populations have declined significantly to a 65-85% on many similar study areas between 1995-2017 (Franklin et al. 2021). Added to the misery, the Spotted Owls who are extremely territorial were found to be dispersing from one breeding territory to another. Dr. Julianna M. Jenkins, a wildlife biologist (USDA Forest Service) and other authors found a 17% increase in Spotted Owl dispersal from their own territory where Barred Owls invaded (Jenkins et al. 2021).

Initially Spotted Owls were victim to large scale habitat loss due to commercial timber activity. The Federal Government’s timely intervention and the enactment of the Northwest Forest Plan took into account the protection of these native Spotted Owls. Much to the surprise of Dr. Lowell Diller, he found that Spotted Owl numbers were still declining based on certain demographic models. A wildlife biologist then with the Green Diamond company and a professor at the Humboldt State University, who spent more than two decades working on these owls collected the largest dataset for these owls and developed monitoring programs for several other species. As datasets showed an astounding decline in the population of Spotted Owls even after ban on logging and declaring more than 24 million hectares of forest to public lands, there seemed to be no improvement in Spotted Owl numbers. The real reason was elsewhere. With his dog Riley, and shaking hands at times he would play calls of Barred Owls and take matters onto his own hand of ending the life of these species along with many other colleagues, as the project became operational. It was evident that the Barred Owls were competing with the natives, sometimes physically harassing the Spotted Owls and removing them off their own home. But the question still remained. How do Barred Owls who have spent millennia in the North-Eastern America expanded their range towards the west.

Barred Owls were documented as late as 1959 in British Columbia and by the late 1970s in parts of Washington. Amongst many theories, some suggest that at one point, the Great Plains acted as a barrier for these owls. However, as people started inhabiting these areas, constructed buildings,

planted trees and agriculture expanded- Barred Owls found a way to expand their range through these areas. A recent alternate theory based on genetic data states that maybe an existing population of Western Barred Owls were already thriving from a larger population of Barred Owls in the boreal forests of Canada that split long ago. However, they might not have been discovered until recently. But a surge in the invasiveness may be due to the loss of the boreal forests in Canada due to climate change. Whatever may be the reason for their boom in population, Spotted Owls were at risk. Demographic results showed a decline of 7-8% per year, which was concerning. Even though, the government along with the scientists did a fabulous job of protecting the habitat and hoped both the species would reach an equilibrium and may even increase in the long run, all hopes were laid down and an experimental project was set up. Diller said – “We have two choices. We do nothing and Spotted Owls go extinct slowly or we could control Barred Owl populations at some places.”



The consequences were profound. According to Dr. Diller- as soon as Barred Owl populations started going down, a boost in the Spotted Owl populations were seen in terms of species occupancy sites. Dr. Wiens showed that lethal or non-lethal removal of Barred Owl actually worked as removal of Barred Owls had a positive effect on the long-term population declines.

But what about Barred Owls and where is the end?

As lawsuits were filed against the project, a lot of people saw it as a controversial decision and beyond our ethics to interfere with nature. And to an extent, it seems valid because of the charisma these owls exhibit as predators of old growth forests. However, the Spotted Owls would not have faced such a threat if people did not participate in unsustainable and rampant logging at the very first place, which disrupted their ecosystem and allowed the Barred Owls to invade their territory. Therefore, as we are to blame, we must try to act on our deeds and right the wrongs. While it seems like a success story to an extent, but at what cost? Wildlife conservation in the name of killing one wild species to save another will always have collateral damage in the future. In upcoming years, we will destroy more habitats and put more species at risk. Does that pave a way for more such experiments where we have to compromise one species in the name of another? Only time will tell.

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Rounak Patra is a birdwatcher, researcher and photographer who worked with Wildlife Institute of India. His research interests include community ecology of birds, invasion ecology and plant-bird interaction.



মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা এবং প্যাঁচা

শিলাদিত্য মুখোপাধ্যায়, কনাদ বৈদ্য

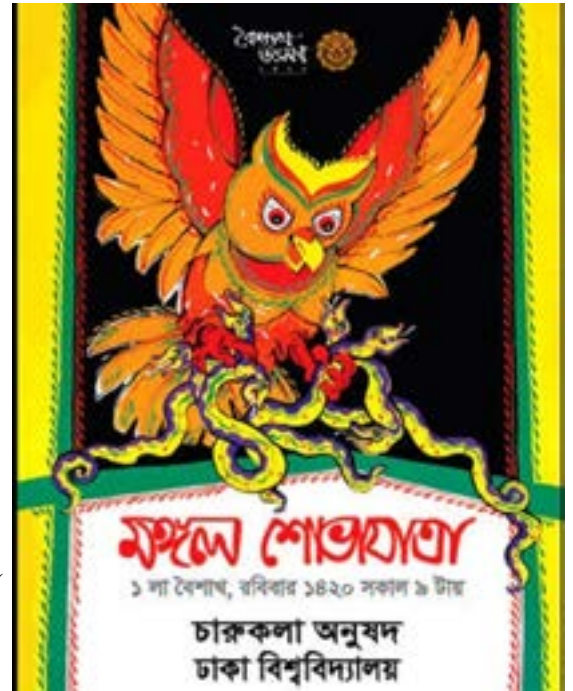
শহুরে রাজপথ থেকে পাড়ার অলিগলি, গানে-গানে আর কলতানে ছোট-বড় রং-বেরঙের মুখোশ বা মোটিফ হাতে নিয়ে চলেছেন শ'য়ে শ'য়ে মানুষ। সানাইয়ের সুর আর ঢাকের তালে মুখরিত আকাশ-বাতাস। প্রত্যেক বছর বাংলা নববর্ষে এমনই দৃশ্য দেখা যায় ওপার বাংলায়। নতুন বছরকে আহ্বান জানানোর এই রীতি পরিচিত ‘মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা’ নামে।

নব্বইয়ের দশকের প্রাক্কালে এই রেওয়াজ ঢাকা ইউনিভার্সিটির Faculty of Fine Arts (FFA) -এর হাত ধরে পরিচিতি লাভ করে। শুরুর পেছনে রাজনৈতিক প্রেক্ষিত থাকলেও বর্তমানে এই আনন্দ মিছিল যে বাঙালিয়ানার এক ধারক ও বাহক তা বললে একদমই অত্যুক্তি করা হয়না। এই মুহুর্তে ১লা বৈশাখ বাংলাদেশের অন্যতম বৃহত্তম ধর্মনিরপেক্ষ উৎসব।

পয়লা বৈশাখের দিন FFA-এর ছাত্র-শিক্ষকরা তো বটেই, জাতি-ধর্ম নির্বিশেষে এই বর্ণময় শোভাযাত্রায় পা মেলায় সংস্কৃতি মনস্ক সাধারণ মানুষ। তবে সবচেয়ে আকর্ষণীয় বিষয় হল শোভাযাত্রার অনুষ্ঠানগুলি। বাংলার সংস্কৃতিকে বিশ্বমঞ্চে তুলে ধরতে বিভিন্ন লোকজ উপাদান, যেমন- মুখোশ, ট্যাপা পুতুল, বাউল, মুর্শিদি, ঝুমুর, ঢাক ইত্যাদি থেকে শুরু করে হাতি, বাঘ, মাছ, প্যাঁচা, ময়ূরের প্রতিকৃতিও ব্যবহার করা হয়। এই উপাদানগুলির ভেতর নিহিত থাকে যাবতীয় অপশক্তির অবসান ঘটিয়ে শান্তি আর ঐক্য প্রতিষ্ঠার বার্তা।

বাঙালি বরাবরই “জাত ছজুগে”। বর্ষবরণের এই উৎসবের আমেজ তাই পড়শি দেশের গভী ছাড়িয়ে হইহই করে ঢুকে পড়েছে এপার বাংলাতেও। প্রথমে ১৯৯৪ সালে শান্তিনিকেতন আর পরে বনগাঁতে। তারপর ২০১৭ থেকে কলকাতার বুকো মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা পালিত হচ্ছে নিয়মিত ভাবে। বাংলার প্রবাহমান লোকসংস্কৃতি ও সম্প্রীতির আদর্শকে জনসমক্ষে তুলে ধরার লক্ষ্য নিয়ে “মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা কলকাতা” নামক একটি সংস্থা যাদবপুর সুকান্ত সেতুর মোড় থেকে যোধপুর পার্ক অবধি বর্ণাঢ্য শোভাযাত্রা আয়োজন করে। এই সম্পর্কিত তথ্য পুঙ্খানুপুঙ্খ ভাবে পাওয়া যাবে সংস্থাটির নিজস্ব ফেসবুক গ্রুপে।

এবারে আসা যাক শোভা যাত্রায় প্যাঁচার উপস্থিতি নিয়ে (ছবিতে দেখুন)। অন্যান্য পশুপাখির পাশাপাশি এত পরিমাণে কারুকার্য করা, বিভিন্ন মাধ্যমের, বিভিন্ন নকশার, রঙচঙে প্যাঁচার মুখোশের ব্যবহার সাধারণ মানুষের সঙ্গে পক্ষীপ্রেমীদের মনেও উত্তেজনা



জাগাতে বাধ্য করে। প্রশ্ন জাগে, গ্রাম বাংলার এতসব পরিচিত পাখি ছেড়ে প্যাঁচার ব্যবহার কি শুধু মাত্রই শোভা বৃদ্ধির উদ্দেশ্যে? আসলে তা নয়। সহজ কারণ, প্যাঁচা এমন একটা পাখি যাদের চোখ দুটির অবস্থান আমাদেরই মতো, পাশাপাশি। সেই কারণে এদের মুখের আদলে মুখোশ বানানো অপেক্ষাকৃত সহজ। মাথায় গলিয়েও নেওয়া যায় চটপট। স্বভাবেও এরা বিচিত্র। রাতের অন্ধকারে প্রায় নিঃশব্দে, তীক্ষ্ণ দৃষ্টিশক্তি নিয়ে, ক্ষীপ্র গতিতে শিকার ধরে। গভীর আর কর্কশ স্বরে ডাকে। মানুষের গতিবিধি যেসব জায়গায় কম, যেসব জায়গা নিয়ে ছোটবেলা থেকে ভূতপ্রেতের গল্প শুনে আসছে সেসব নিরিবিলি জায়গা- মানে চিলেকোঠা, শ্মশান, বাঁশ বাগান, তেঁতুল কিংবা শেওড়া গাছে এরা থাকতে পছন্দ করে। প্যাঁচা মানেই রহস্য আর গা ছমছমে ব্যাপার! বাচ্চা থেকে বুড়ো সকলের কাছেই প্যাঁচা সমান আকর্ষণীয়। পুরাণ, গল্পে বা লোক সংস্কৃতিতেও প্যাঁচার উপস্থিতি বহুল প্রচলিত। আবার, প্যাঁচা হাঁদুর খেয়ে ফসল রক্ষা করে, কৃষকের উপকার করে। সাপকে মেরে “মন্দ” বিনাশ করে। অর্থাৎ, সামাজিক এবং লৌকিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গিতে দেখলে প্যাঁচার বাকি পাখিদের কয়েক গোলে পেছনে ফেলে দিয়েছে।

মঙ্গল শোভাযাত্রা কে ইউনেস্কোও “ইনট্যানজিবল হেরিটেজ” হিসাবে স্বীকৃতি দিয়েছে ২০১৬ সালে। তাহলে আর দেরি কেন? আগামী বছর বন্ধু বান্ধবদের সঙ্গে নিয়ে সামিল হয়ে পড়ুন এই আনন্দ মিছিলে। ছবি ঋণঃ তারেক অনু (বাংলাদেশ), কৌস্তভ চ্যাটার্জী (কলকাতা) এবং অন্যান্য সামাজিক মাধ্যম।





Shiladitya is an explorer whose areas of interest range from traveling–trekking–heritage walking to birdwatching. He pioneered the scientific documentation of bird and butterfly diversity of his hometown Bongaon. His travelogues and wildlife-related articles regularly feature in leading travel magazines and newspapers.

Kanad Baidya, one of the founder members of the Birdwatchers' Society, is a doctor by profession. He is also the co-author of "Banglar Pakhpakhali" which some consider as the "Bible of Bengal Birds".



BWS ANNUAL CAMP 2022

Sudipto Roy

The second annual BWS bird watching camp was organised over five days (December 17 to 21, 2022) near Majua under Darjeeling District of West Bengal. The camp was attended by a total of 26 enthusiastic members covering all age groups from college going students to retired seniors. After the first annual camp that was organised in Purulia, the venue for the second camp was carefully chosen to offer a different kind of biosphere in which to observe birds and also to explore a relatively less known birding destination of West Bengal in early winter.

WHERE EXACTLY IS MAJUA AND HOW TO GET THERE

Those who have travelled in the Singalila region of Eastern Himalaya would be familiar with the small town of Manebhanjan (about three hours' drive from Siliguri) from where the uphill trek for Sandakphu starts. Majua at approximately 6000 feet is a journey of another ten kilometres or so below this town. Administratively, it comes under the Tonglu range of the state forest department.



Birders from different parts of the state congregated at Siliguri's New Jalpaiguri station on the wintry December morning of 17th and set off for the pleasurable journey through the mixed forests and tea gardens towards Majua. The 15 km drive from Sukhia Pokhari to Majua via Manebhanjan was terribly bumpy but not enough to dampen the enthusiasm of the intrepid BWS members, who have time and again proven their resilience to travel to difficult areas in search of their avian friends.

Team BWS arrived by noon and were greeted by a lone male White-capped Water Redstart which looked almost like a resident of the homestay Aranyabaas where a majority of the team put up. One can hear the roar of the stream less than 200 meters away that over the next few days revealed three types of Forktails (Little, Spotted and Slaty-backed), Brown Dipper, Water Redstarts (both Plumbeous and White-capped) and different Flycatchers among other gems.

THE STAY AT MAJUA

The birders were put up for the four chilly nights in two different accommodations (“homestays” in today’s tourism parlance) at Majua. One by the main roadside - Aranyabaas which can accommodate up to twenty in different cottages and another at Warbler’s Nest that is less than two kilometres above Aranyabaas.

The bouldered and unpaved road to Warbler’s Nest is quite a challenge to drive even for four-wheel drive vehicles with very high ground clearance. However, it is set up for hardcore birders by another hardcore birder and BWS member and easily accommodated around ten.

Apart from the above par hospitality organised by some of the members themselves, both the locations offered excellent birding opportunities from the campus itself and revealed gems such as :

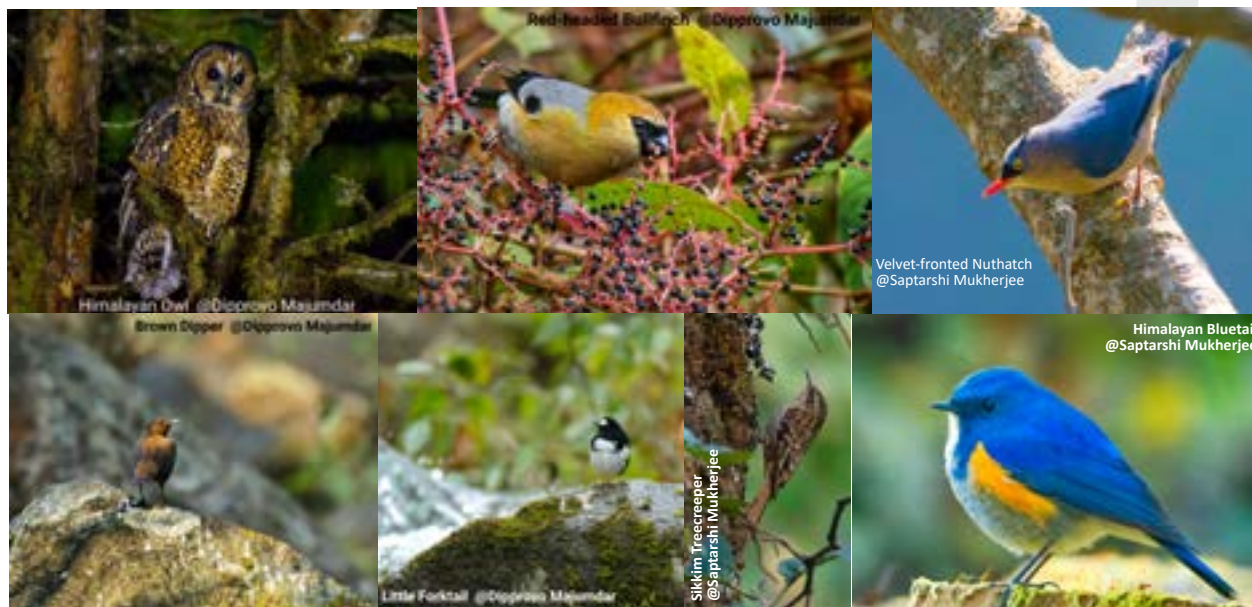
Cupwings like Pygmy and Scaly, Oriental Turtle Dove, Large Hawk Cuckoo, Great Barbet, Scarlet Minivet, Long-tailed Minivet, Ashy Drongo, Russett Sparrow, Large-billed Crow, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, Black Bulbul, Himalayan Bulbul, White-browed Fulvetta, Indian White-eye, Rufous Sibia, Blue Whistling Thrush, Blue-winged Minla, Red-billed Leothrix, Verditer Flycatcher, Olive-backed Pipit. Chestnut-crowned, White-crested, Spotted and Scaly Laughingthrushes are common. White-tailed Nuthatch is also common; One can find Green Magpie, Yellow-billed and Red-billed Blue Magpie, Silver-eared Mesia, Black-winged Cuckooshrike and Black-throated Sunbird. Treecreepers like Rusty-tailed, Sikkim can also be found.

BIRDING ACTIVITIES

The members were split into two groups and they explored various trails alternatively on all the days. One was the bridge over the stream down the road from Aranyabaas and the forests around it. The other was the forest along the trail to Warbler’s Nest (which also crosses the stream a little upstream above the location mentioned earlier). A third trail was the unpaved road that goes to Dhotrey. This trail also crosses the same stream even further upstream but offers better opportunity to walk up the stream on its side.

This area, incidentally, is also home to a melanistic leopard, more popularly known as the black panther.





Being a completely non-touristy area with very sparse local population, the pursuit of bird watching happened in a totally undisturbed manner. There was hardly any manmade noise in the vicinity. Weather, which is a major factor in these eastern Himalayan heights, didn't play truant (despite predictions to the contrary) and offered clear blue skies almost every day.

The highlight of the camp was a trip to Dhotrey on the penultimate day. Dhotrey is in the periphery of Singalila National Park from where the trek to Sandakphu starts. The forest here has short bamboo thickets and promised good birding opportunity albeit in relatively poorer light.

After the morning birding session at Dhotrey, lunch - believe it or not it was delicious biriyani at that altitude and isolation - was eaten in the picnic style amid much camaraderie. The venue for the lunch was the open football field outside the local primary school. Post lunch it was time to depart for Aranyabaas once again.

But a small team stayed back for some owling in the forest behind the school. They had heard the unmistakable call of a rare Himalayan Owl in the forest. A search of more than two hours in the darkness of the evening yielded the desired result when this most coveted bird made a quiet appearance and gave enough photo opportunity to those who dared to stay back.

NON-BIRDING ACTIVITIES AT CAMP

The evenings in the camp were spent in the cosy atmosphere of the large sitting area of Aranyabaas, discussing serious matters in a friendly and healthy atmosphere. While one evening was devoted exclusively to exchange of ideas among members about the society and its future path, another evening was devoted to a presentation by founder member Dr Kanad Baidya, on bird nests and their scientific studies.

Though the subject of nest photography by rank amateur photographers is thought to be a little controversial, there is no two opinion in the scientific community that nesting habits of birds is a



very important subject that needs to be understood and studied scientifically. Needless to say, the presentation was on the science of nests and nesting and Kanad drew from his rich experience of studying nests for a long time to answer various queries of the members.

Another evening was spent watching the delightful presentation by naturalists Mridulkanti Kar and Sourav Mandal on the flora and fauna of the area around their homestay Warbler's Nest. Sourav, who is a herpetologist and conducts herping tours in the area in monsoon, regaled the members with his stories and photographs of the rich natural history of the reptiles of the area.

The camp ended on the morning of 21st December with a promise by the members to meet once again at the next camp. Where it will be will have to remain a secret for now.

Here comes the trip report on eBird: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/93984>



Sudipto Roy, is an ex-journalist and retired communications professional. He is a nature lover with focus on birds of the Indian sub-continent. Among his numerous other hobbies are travel, photography and reading.



BWS BIRD WALK: NALBAN BHERI

Anirban Bhaduri

Birdwatchers' Society planned its second Public Birdwalk in Nalban Bheri, Salt Lake on 08 Jan 2023 after a successful first edition in Subhash Sarovar. The idea was to take participants into a wetland habitat to experience the avian life there. An added attraction of the wetland is the vast open spaces with the sky stretching all across unlike what most city dwellers' experience.

Assembly for participants was at 6:30 am, but people had difficulty reaching because of roadblocks to facilitate a Marathon. Volunteers and participants all made it through with some ingenuity. This time round, we had more participants with a large contingent of children from Disappearing Dialogues, an NGO that works with children whose families are dependent on the wetlands, a few children and a teacher from DPS Newtown and a few young doctors from an eye hospital in Salt Lake. Our members were out in strength to conduct the walk supported by 5 spotter scopes, enough binoculars to pass around and in high spirits.



Participants at the Second BWS Birdwalk assembled outside Nalban Bheri

Even before the walk started, bird education began with a bare tree with a changing kaleidoscope of birds. For many, this was the first encounter with Chestnut-tailed Starlings, and comparison with their cousins, the Indian Pied Starling and Common Myna was easily established. We were all standing close to a water booth for the



Watching Wetlands Birds

marathoners and volunteers operating the booth were quite curious about our activities. They soon warmed up to us and offered water and oranges to our group! Once all were assembled, Maj Parihar introduced the walk, explained dos and don'ts, divided us into 5 groups and we were off after prayers at the Bonbibi Temple, symbolic of the Sunderbans.

As soon as the groups entered, we began to see Barn Swallows buzzing about. Some of the children had been here last winter and were excited to identify what was instantly familiar from their past experience. Our first interesting opportunity was to help identify Indian Cormorant from Little Cormorant and everyone was delighted to see bright blue eyes through the scopes.

We continued moving slowly, each child and adult savouring the sight of birds in close up. A Great-crested Grebe drew a lot of oohs and aahs, once we narrated the story of their journey from mountain lakes. There were a pair of resident Little Grebe in the same waterbody as a counterpoint.

A pair of Pied Kingfisher also created excitement, as it was a first time sighting for our guests. They had already encountered White-throated Kingfisher and Common Kingfisher before.

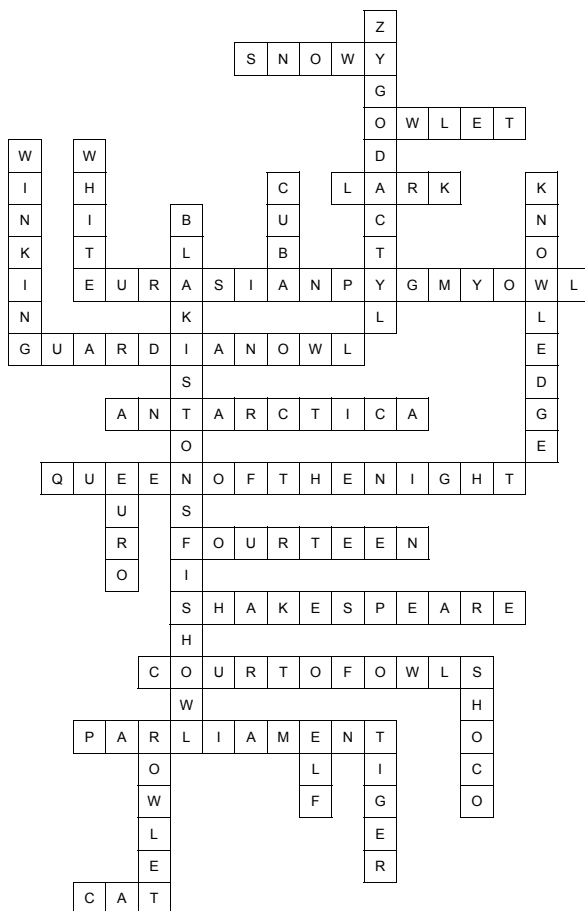
Our final stop was at a place where hundreds of migratory ducks were seen congregating at the far bank of the waterbody. Around 150 Tufted Duck, 100 Gadwall and a few Ferruginous Duck. Waterfowl counted, we all walked back to where we began, tired, but happy. Besides, the heat and exhaustion was obvious when one of our members kept seeing Flamingoes whenever Painted Stork flew overhead. The delight in the children, having seen 44 species of bird, their arguments over identification, interpreting pictures in a field guide and taking field notes was the highlight of this walk.

Checklists:

<https://ebird.org/india/checklist/S125668347>

<https://ebird.org/india/checklist/S126831350>

Owl Crossword (Answer)



Across

- 2 The owl that is Quebec's national bird (5)
- 3 Baby Owl (5)
- 7 Opposite to owl-personalities; also named after a bird (4)
- 10 Smallest owl in Europe (8,5,3)
- 11 Stone Name of Unique Aboriginal standing stone near Perth (8,3,5)
- 12 Continent with no owls (10)
- 13 Ancient Mesopotamian Goddess riding lions, flanked by owls (5,2,3,5)
- 15 Number of neck vertebrae in owls (8)
- 16 Playwright who described the owl as "Fatal bellman?" (11)
- 17 Fictional criminal organization in DC Comics, adversaries of Batman (5,2,3)
- 19 Collective noun for owls (10)
- 23 Domestic mammal namesake of Long-eared Owl (3)

Down

- 1 Description of owl feet (10)
- 4 The Barking Owl is also known as the ----Owl (7)
- 5 "Alone and warming his five wits, the -----owl in the belfry sits." A colour (5)
- 6 Country where the fossil of the largest-ever owl was found (4)
- 8 Owls symbolise wisdom. A synonym with the word wisdom OWL in it (9)
- 9 Owl Emperor of the Night (9,4,3)
- 14 Modern currency accepted by multiple countries displays an owl (4)
- 18 The only Burrowing Owl found in Aruba-its national symbol (5)
- 20 Pokemon owl (6)
- 21 Smallest owl in the world (3)
- 22 Ferocious mammal namesake of the Great Horned Owl (5)


TALKING 'BIRDS' WITH ONCOLOGISTS – BIRD TALK AT TATA MEDICAL CENTRE Anirban Bhaduri



Group Photo at the Auditorium, Tata Medical Centre, Newtown, Rajarhat.

On the 21st of January, 2023, one of our founding members, Dr. Kanad Baidya along with another member Mr Mainak Das held a talk about birds in the auditorium of the Tata Medical Centre, in Newtown, Rajarhat. Kanad had been invited by his senior, Dr. Bipradas Roy, a gastrointestinal oncologist. The target audience was the doctor community of the hospital along with their families. The lecture on 21st was to be followed by a bird walk by BWS on 22nd January in Newtown, Rajarhat.

The afternoon program started with a lively session anchored by Kanad and Mainak with an introduction to the unique biogeography of West Bengal, stretching from the mountains to the sea. Thereafter the pair spoke of the important habitats in this area along with the birds unique to each habitat. The children were kept interested by sharing interesting stories and questions to pique their interest. The birds were brought to life by beautiful pictures and their sounds (playback supported by



Birdwatchers' Society

Organising
a Bird Talk and Walk
at New Town, Rajarhat, Kolkata

Talk : 21st January 2023, Saturday
2pm onwards
Venue : Tata Medical Centre,
New Town, Rajarhat, Kolkata

Talk by: Dr. Kanad Baidya and Mainak Das

Walk: 22nd January 2023, Sunday
7am onwards
Starting point : Diplomatic Enclave,
Action Area IIE, Newtown (22.614596, 88.458792)

Mr. Priyam Chattopadhyay and Mrs. Pampa Mistri).

After this enthralling lecture, Mr. Mainak Das also spoke about bird photography, and camera gear. Maj. B S Parihar followed this up with a brief talk on binoculars for bird watching. Maj. Parihar also gave a brief introduction about Birdwatchers' Society, its activities and also how one could join and contribute to the society.

A group photograph with participants rounded up the day in the auditorium, followed by lunch hosted in the hospital. The lunch session gave BWS members a chance for intense interaction and plans for future activities.



BWS Members at the Tata Medical Centre

Anirban Bhaduri- An Eye surgeon by profession and avid birder by passion. A member of Birdwatchers' Society.



Mountain Scops Owl

Birdwatchers' Society

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