

Journal of Indian Bird Records and Conservation

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birdwala – notes of a vagrant birder...

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Can birds be conserved? Bird habitats are under threat everywhere. The problem is that they are not seen as important as tigers or elephants. The keystone species like the great Indian bustard and Jerdon's Courser are being protected in a few Protected Areas, but these are not going to result in total conservation of the species. The more than 20,000 sq kms of Jerdon's Courser habitat has never been surveyed in the manner it should have been. The grasslands of the bustards are now sugarcane lands.



It is in the nature of conservation laws in India that all Protected Areas need to be notified, and settlement of rights of people or users should be settled in a 'full and final' manner. Complete settlement of rights, preventing access and disturbance or human impact, and finalising the boundaries of Protected Areas actually results in the formation of a wildlife sanctuary or national park.

So, how do you know if you have a properly constituted wildlife sanctuary or a national park that can protect the great Indian bustard or the flamingo? These are birds that do not know that they are supposed to live out their lives within a confined boundary, or within the limits of a Protected Area. The great Indian bustard moves through many village fodder grasslands, scrublands, fallow fields, flowering crops and perhaps, has complex family or flock movements across several districts in semi-arid and arid habitats of India. Can this nation afford to protect the great Indian bustard at the cost of small landowners and marginal farmers who survive with the favours of an uncertain monsoon?

Perhaps there are lessons to be learnt from ancient India and the several large tracts of wilderness, forests and waterbodies that have been protected by the blessings of religion. The Sri Venkateswara National Park in Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh does not have elephants or tigers or any keystone bird species or other mammals. The more than 700 sq kms forests around the famous Tirupati-Tirumala temple are known for nearly 300 species of birds and the endemic golden gecko *Calodactylodes aureus*. Similarly, the Jerdon's Courser is known from the foothills of the Eastern Ghats, and is protected at Sri Lankamalleswara Wildlife Sanctuary. These forests are protected through the blessings of Shiva, as are the Penchalakona Wildlife Sanctuary and the Gundlabrahmeswara-metta Wildlife Sanctuary.

It is perhaps the growing responsibility of birdwatchers and bird organisations to discuss and debate how to intervene with State and Central governments to prioritise bird conservation. How? There is only one solution. Information = Documentation = Publishing. We have to publish our information. And, we have to publish fast. There are growing networks. There could perhaps be more than tens of thousands of birders with excellent camera skills, access to bird handbooks and the ability to travel and network with each other. The day of waiting for over-extended science journals to publish scant information is long gone. This is the day and age of instant publishing and instant dissemination.

All forms of publishing are respected today. A small photograph somewhere on the net, a group of birders reporting their checklists on netlists, bird-organisations conducting a bird count or an eclectic wanderer visiting a wildlife sanctuary are all equally important. Who is more important? And, more valuable? The one who publishes faster, with references to locations, with good photographs and with proper understanding? Today, one does not need to write a scientific paper. One does not even need to know the latin names of the birds.

All one needs to do is place the information out there, on the net. There are many others who would contribute their own bits of knowledge and bring together the importance of that understanding that a small little cryptic laughing thrush found somewhere is equally as important as the great Indian bustard or flamingo. Bird conservation is possible in these changing times, only with changing abilities and understanding. This is going to be crucial to protecting bird habitats in India. Dissemination of net-based information by birders and non-birders will increasingly be important for bird conservation.

Bird Conservation – Protected Areas in India

Keoladeo Ghana National Park

Wilderness of ancient Vrindavan

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Most Protected Areas in India have been conserved over thousands of years due to local beliefs and sentiments. Religion, resources and rights are the primary causes. Rights over water, natural resources and fodder usually important reasons for protecting habitat and wilderness.



The eternal legends of Krishna & Radha are the very embodiment of love, faith and devotion. Mathura and Vrindavan are in the hearts of millions of devotees as the sacred playgrounds of Krishna, his elder brother, Balarama, and his devoted Radha. The tales of Krishna and his adventures in Mathura, Vrindavan and the nearby areas mention flowing rivers, forests and blissful wilderness. Today's Mathura and Vrindavan areas have had to evolve into urban and mofussil habitats and are nowhere recognisable as natural wilderness. The waterbodies and river are polluted and cannot be recognised as the places mentioned in the sacred Srimad Bhagavatam texts.

The Keoladeo Ghana National Park at Bharatpur, Rajasthan, is the only wilderness area near Mathura and Vrindavan. A visit to the famous bird sanctuary is a must for most wildlife and nature enthusiasts, as of course, for birdwatchers. One can only imagine that this wilderness area could be similar to the eco-clime of the times of Krishna and the Mahabharata (c. during 3100 BC). The National Park is a crucial area protected by the Rajasthan Forest Department. The size of the Protected Area is nowhere comparable to the Project Tiger Reserves or the Himalayan National Parks, but is vital to an understanding of the manner of wilderness that Vrindavan would have been resplendent in, during the times of Krishna, Balarama and Radha. At times, along any silent trail within Keoladeo Ghana, one can almost imagine that Krishna and his playmates would come running through from around the trails and capture you with their songs and games. If only a time portal was around, one could get transported immediately to an age and period long gone, and yet, be present modern India and its people. One must compliment the forest officers, nature guides and bird experts for their love and passion for the Keoladeo Ghana National Park. They are truly responsible for having been able to retain the wilderness values of the Sanctuary.





Today, more than 230 species of birds are known to be resident or visitors at the 29 sq. km. Keoladeo Ghana National Park. The wilderness area is also a World Heritage Site since it was declared a Protected Area in 1971. The unique aspect of the National Park is that the complex system of wetlands and small lakes separated by *bunds* that also serve as nature trails was due to the needs emerging from water scarcity in the region. The abundance of wintering waterfowl also provided a bonus as a hunting reserve to the royal house of Bharatpur. This heritage, created nearly 250 years ago, is actually dedicated to Shiva, at the Keoladeo temple. Historical records inform visitors to the Park that Maharaja Surajmal of Bharatpur constructed the *Ajan Bund* during 1726-1763 at the confluence of the Gambhir and Banganga Rivers.



Vrindavan or *Brindavana* (= Groves of 'Brinda' or Basil, *Ocimum spp.*) does retain some aspects of ancient wilderness with two small groves. Ten kms from Mathura, the city is also known as the earlier capital of the *Braj* region, and has always retained its allure within the stories and tales of Krishna as an ancient forest. There are hundreds of temples in the area, with some temples, such as the Govinda Deo temple, built in 1590. It was in the year 1515 that Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu arrived at Vrindavan, with the specific objective to locate the various locations of Krishna, and to identify the sacred forests by the sheer magic of his spiritual trance. These forests have always faced urban impact and very few locations can be identified as pristine, if ever.

There are attempts to reclaim the earlier aspects of the wilderness of Mathura and Vrindavan. Several afforestation, urban waste management and pollution management projects are being undertaken. These are all sincere efforts, but it is the ever-pristine, always-sacred pre-ancient wilderness of Mathura and Vrindavan of Krishna, Balarama and Radha that should not be lost to modern development. The Keoladeo Ghana National Park has several aspects of biodiversity and ornithology values, and these would always be considered as important. It would also be valuable to firmly establish the National Park as a pilgrimage destination to the millions of devotees to guarantee conservation.



All photographs by BB Govinda Swami

Bird Pilgrimages – *The magic of the Orient***Rishikesh – Gateway to the Himalayas****Suresh C. Sharma**Sonepat, Haryana, India. sureshcsharma@gmail.com

Bird Pilgrimages – Watching birds in the Indian Subcontinent is truly a pilgrimage opportunity. Splendid biodiversity-rich locations are usually adjacent to sacred pilgrimage areas. Birding becomes a blessing.



Named after Vishnu, Rishikesh in Dehradun, is near the Tehri Garhwal and Pauri Garhwal districts, and leads to nearly twenty river valleys in the mountains. Birdwatchers assemble every year, twice, to spread out in the Garhwal Himalayas for the Great Himalayan Bird Count in the summer and winter, conducted by Prateek Panwar of ARCH. This has led to the collection of considerable bird distribution data and species-lists for various locations in the river valleys. Except for a few high altitude species, most Himalayan birds can be seen easily near the river and forests of Rishikesh. The various ashrams have been sanctuaries for birds and mammals and visitors can get to actually internalise the magic of the Himalayas and the Ganges when they stay in Rishikesh for some days. The land of Kedarkhand, where Rama did penance, and Lakshmana crossed the river is the first of bird pilgrimages of India.

One of the most important pilgrimage locations in India, along the Ganges and near Haridwar, this is the gateway to the Himalayas. The mighty river comes out of the Shivalik mountains and flows through the plains. The river's roar in the mountain valleys is not to be heard as it flows silently along Rishikesh. The Neelakanth Mahadev Temple nearby is one of the most ancient and sacred of the several temples and ashrams near the river. At 372 msl (1,745 fsl), in the Dehradun district of Uttarakhand, the city is uniquely alcohol-free, vegetarian and also free of plastic bags. Birding in this region is a never-ending paradise for one can never run short of trails and locations. More than 250 bird species are known from the region, and also, of course, the Mountain Quail, nearby.



Streaked Laughingthrush *Garrulax lineatus*
(Photos by Suresh Sharma)

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