



Black-headed Ibises and a juvenile Open-billed Stork.

Birds of different feathers

The RHATC trip to Rameshwaram was a visual treat - for the landscapes and the variety of birds. Over the course of our drives from one point to another, we stopped at every occasion to view flocks of birds – either resident or migratory, that one of us had identified with the trail of cars stepping out enthusiastically with binoculars and cameras.

Our first stop was the Vettankudy Bird Sanctuary, located in Sivaganga district. The sanctuary is a protected area consisting of small drainage basins which attract more than 8,000 winter migratory birds belonging to 217 species, mostly from European and North Asian countries. It is a breeding habitat for Grey Herons, darters, spoonbills, White Ibis, Asian Openbill Stork, and Night Herons. Over here, we also saw species like the Grey Heron, Oriental Darter, Little Cormorant, Little Egret, and Cattle Egret.

Understanding why these birds are present where they are calls for a brief lesson on bird ecology and the various flyways of the world.

Flyways are geographical regions within which a single or a group of migratory species completes its annual cycle – breeding, moulting, staging, and non-breeding. Flyways provide spatial frameworks for management and conservation across international borders. During the months of October to February, one gets to see these migratory birds. In the southeastern region of Tamil Nadu, birds like cormorants, openbills, darters, ibises, frequent the coastal areas. Other migratory species include the Black-necked Crane, Indian Skimmer, Lesser Adjutant, Masked Finfoot, Wood Snipe, Black-headed Ibis, Lesser Flamingo, Pygmy Cormorant, White-eyed Gull, Northern Bald Ibis, White-bellied Heron, and others. The state of Tamil Nadu is situated in the Central Asian flyway, which means that apart from Sri Lanka, it is one of the southernmost land masses that birds can visit in the migratory season.

Birds are key indicators of ecological and environmental changes. Some of the direct responses to environmental changes are behavioral and physiological manifesting as changes in the characteristics of the individual. Like a domino effect, the basic population rates: birth rate, death rate, and rate of dispersal are affected. Changes in these three primary population parameters then create changes in secondary population parameters such as density, population size, geographic range, habitat occupancy, age structure, sex ratios, or the proportion of birds that breed (Temple & Wiens 1989).

In the case of migratory birds, identifying movement routes and stopover sites is necessary for developing effective management and conservation strategies for migratory species. India is located at the heart of Central Asian Flyway (CAF) and hosts about 71

per cent of the migratory waterbirds of the CAF. India's wetlands play a crucial and conducive role in sustaining populations of migrating waterbird species which makes sustaining the health of these habitats crucial for maintaining the waterbird populations within the CAF.

Conservation of migratory waterbirds and wetlands has received considerable attention in national policy-making and programmes, as well as international commitments. However, much remains to be done for ensuring a healthy network of wetlands and securing healthy populations of migratory waterbirds in India and the CAF region. Being a signatory to several international conventions which directly or indirectly support wetlands and waterbird conservation is one of the routes taken towards conservation. Key amongst these is the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention), the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). (The Journal of Governance 2019).

We come back to the birds on our trip ...

Our second bird stop was the proposed bird sanctuary on the way to Arichal Munai, the tip of the Rameshwaram island. The sanctuary was yet to be named; some contenders were Kothandaramar Bird Sanctuary and Rameshwaram Bird Sanctuary. During the north-east monsoon season which falls between October to January, various water birds migrate to these areas. In the shallow waters, we spotted the Slender-billed Gull, Brown-headed Gull, some plovers and stints, and lesser crested terns.

Valinokkam, a salt pan area was another proposed bird sanctuary that we visited. It used to be a paddy cultivation. The terrain was made up of dried-up algae mats with pockets of loose, marshy sand. The location is where Pink Flamingos visit but unfortunately, we couldn't catch the sight of them. We saw about 3,000 wader birds instead. Through Usha's macro lens, we saw the salt crystal patterns on the ground as well. Simply splendid.

The final stop was at the Therthankal Bird Sanctuary, situated in Ramanathapuram. Most of these offbeat bird sanctuaries have a watch tower with two storeys to adjust viewing levels. The birds we spotted were a Honey Buzzard, Purple Herons, Pond Herons, Glossy Ibises, Cattle Egrets, water snakes and a pelican, gliding smoothly before our eyes before disappearing in the groves.

The importance of protecting these paths and habitats cannot be emphasised enough. Migration is an adaptation mechanism which helps birds overcome weather adversities from their places of origin and secure easier access to food and resources. Wetlands, terrestrial habitats, river beds, sand banks are all areas where migratory birds frequent.

References

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