When catfish met birds: a Perumbakkam lake's tale

About six months ago, my friends and I were birdwatching at Perumbakkam Lake, one of the popular locations in Chennai. During our visit, we noticed this intriguing event – an uncanny encounter between catfish and a Spot-billed Pelican. It was a nice winter morning, an unexpected shower helped cope with the weather. We drove down to the Perumbakkam lake, enroute T-Nagar and Old Mahabalipuram Road. The road looked quite occupied, from the cyclists pedaling their way along the corner to the bikers carefully manoeuvring their way in between buses and cars. It wasn't busy, but it wasn't too quiet.

We reached the spot at around 7 am. A mustering of Painted Storks busily foraging the waterfront, immediately caught our eyes. It's heavy yellow beak with down-turned tip, the dark orange head, and light pink elongated slender legs are impossible to miss. Meanwhile, there was a flock of Northern Pintails with its heads dipped inside the water. It has this peculiar habit of foraging by dipping its head in the shallow water for food, according to the National Audubon Society. There emerged another interesting couple from within this flock, who seemed to be in a hurry. From the distance, they appeared like Pintails, but a closer inspection through our binoculars revealed their distinctively larger, flatter beak, which is a sign of yet another beautiful migrant – Northern Shoveler. We were unable to catch the green head of the male, as the birds were positioned against the sun. The two of them were in some sort of rush as they swam their way back into the flock and were gone.

And we saw a couple of Bronze-winged Jacana foraging close to the swamp near the road. Blue-tailed Bee-eaters playing hunt and rest like a flash, a flurry of motion and fleeting response. Meanwhile, Spot-bellied Pelicans were scattered all around the

Lake and a Pond Heron was perched on the water lily, patiently awaiting its prey, all the while hearing an annoyed Red-wattled Lapwing. The poor thing was distressed by a stray dog, and of course, us (talkative strangers). It went on like this did-u-do-it-\--did-did-did-u-do-it. In response we could only say, "Sorry dude, we did it and we will stop now."

We moved from there and walked past the speed bump and abandoned tollbooth. The metro wall stood between us on the road and the lake. As we walked past the bump, looking for a gap in between the temporary wall, questions about the fate of this precious wetland ecosystem swirled in my mind. Could this development disturb the birds? Would they be forced to seek a new home? I left it up to the time and moved on, it wasn't easy though. A bulldozer parked in the corner and a huge opening in the temporary wall piqued our curiosity. Slipping through, we positioned ourselves to gain an unobstructed view of the lake. A lone pelican was paddling its way effortlessly to the other side.

However, it looked disturbed as it picked up the pace and turned back with its opened beak to shush someone. We screened the surface behind the pelican to see a school of catfish. It looked menacing in numbers and kept following the bird. We immediately got engrossed by this event and followed them closely for a while.

On the water's surface, we first noticed a pelican swimming in front of this school of catfish. Although we were unsure, it appeared that the fish were chasing the pelican. Pelican accelerated and frequently flashed them in an attempt to frighten the fish, but it was in vain.

After a while, we noticed a flock of pelicans moving toward and joining the lone bird. Because there were so many catfish, we assumed they would feast. But what we observed from the outside was truly astounding. The catfish and pelican were both snacking on some smaller fish. The pelicans were divided and dispersed all over as the catfish group grew in size within a short period of time.

However, things didn't stop there. When there was a second visitor, the scene took an unexpected turn. A Painted Stork, with its striking white plumage and long, slender bill, added a new dimension to the encounter. As this new fella joined the pelicans, the situation became even more intense.

The catfish, however, proved to be a formidable adversary. With their numbers growing and their size of the school increasing, they remained a challenging opponent for the birds. The stork, along with the pelicans, tried their best to round up the catfish near a dense bush, hoping to limit their movement and make it easier to catch them. Despite their efforts, the catfish proved to be agile and elusive. They swiftly navigated through the water, skilfully avoiding the birds' attempt to catch them. The catfish split into two or three smaller groups, making it even more challenging for the birds to control the situation. Interestingly, it seemed as if the pelicans and storks had a well-thought-out strategy, positioned behind each of these smaller catfish groups. They persisted in their pursuit.

After some time, one of the smaller groups of catfish found themselves cornered against the bank of the lake, near a patch of water hyacinth. Seizing the opportunity, the painted stork and the pelicans swiftly closed in on the trapped fish.

With their sharp beaks and expert hunting skills, the stork and the pelicans feasted on the catfish that were finally within their reach. It was a moment of triumph for the birds, as they managed to secure a meal despite the formidable resistance put up by the catfish. As the Painted Stork and the pelicans enjoyed their hard-earned feast, the other catfish groups dispersed, retreating to safer areas of the lake. The encounter between the catfish and the birds had come to an end, leaving behind an intriguing spectacle of nature's power dynamics.

Witnessing this extraordinary event has been a memorable experience for me since then. This event has the perfect highlight of the intricate interplay between different species in their struggle for survival. It serves as a reminder of the diverse and fascinating behaviours that can be observed in the natural world.

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