

“From Checklists to Celebrations”: Following the Flight of Selvaganesh

Introduction

The RHATC ‘Follow the Leader’ sessions are designed to expose fellows to practitioners who exemplify leadership in conservation, individuals who bridge scientific knowledge, grassroots action, and innovative community engagement. On 21 September 2025, we the RHATC fellows had the privilege of learning from Mr. K. Selvaganesh, a teacher from Valparai in Tamil Nadu’s Western Ghats, and an active contributor to bird conservation through both cultural initiatives and citizen science. The session was deeply instructive, showing how a schoolteacher’s enthusiasm for birds can ripple outward to students, communities, and global conservation networks. Selvaganesh’s pioneering practice of celebrating the annual arrival of the grey wagtail, his extensive contributions to eBird, and his leadership in student birding activities formed the backbone of this ‘Follow the Leader’ interaction.

About the Leader: K. Selvaganesh

K. Selvaganesh was an English teacher at Cinchona Government High School in Valparai, and is presently posted at Coimbatore. Though his professional role is to teach English language to kids, his personal passion for birds has transformed his classroom into a hub of ecological awareness. Over the past thirteen years, he has blended birdwatching with pedagogy, encouraging students to look closely at the living world around them.

What distinguishes Selvaganesh is his ability to turn observation into celebration. In 2015, he began a tradition of welcoming the Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*, a small migratory bird that breeds in the Himalaya and spends winter in southern India. Noticing the bird’s regular seasonal return, he framed its arrival as a cause for joy. At his school, students began to mark the wagtail’s first sighting with distribution of sweets, symbolic of welcoming a guest. Over time, the event grew into a local awareness campaign: posters appeared in public spaces, students created educational content,

and the wagtail became a symbol of ecological connectivity for the people of Valparai.

This act of celebration is more than symbolic. The wagtail tradition has sparked curiosity amongst students and other people of the area, which ultimately raised awareness about migratory birds.

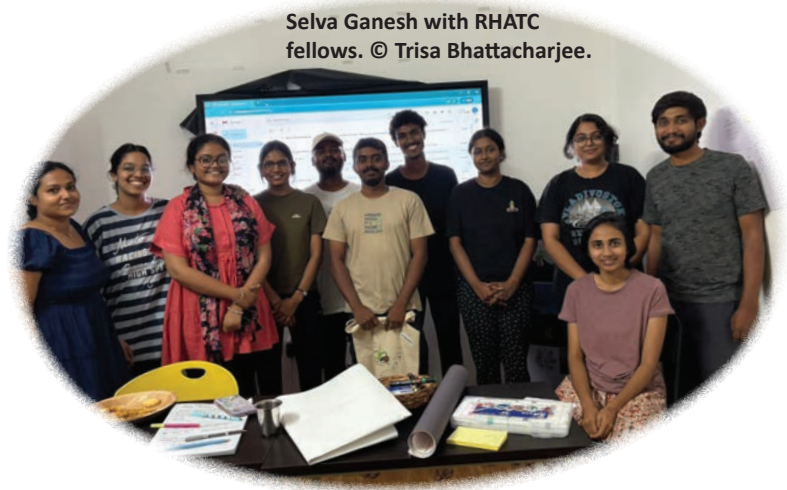
Contribution to eBird and Citizen Science

Another key dimension of Selvaganesh’s leadership is his sustained contribution to eBird, the world’s largest citizen science database for birds. In a community where many students lack smartphones or internet access, he devised a creative system: students make paper checklists of birds they observe, which he reviews and later uploads to eBird.

This simple practice ensures that:

- Student observations become part of a global database, contributing to research on bird migration, abundance, and distribution.
- Young people experience their birdwatching as scientifically valuable, not just recreational.
- Data from Valparai and surrounding Western Ghats landscapes add to larger conservation planning efforts.

Beyond eBird, Selvaganesh and his students have participated in projects such as the Coimbatore Bird Atlas, seasonal bird counts like the Pongal



Selva Ganesh with RHATC fellows. © Trisa Bhattacharjee.

Bird Count, and events including the City Nature Challenge (CNC). His systematic approach ensures that even small-scale student observations feed into large-scale datasets that are shaping the State of India's Birds assessments.

Learnings from the Session

During the "Follow the Leader" session, Selvaganesh shared his insights across five broad themes. His explanations blended practical field experience, cultural narratives, and scientific resources, making the content both accessible and rigorous.

1. Bird Behaviour and Identification

We were introduced to the importance of observing behaviour as a tool for identification. Selvaganesh illustrated this through:

- The hornbill's breeding behaviour- females sealing themselves inside cavities, dependent on the male for food.
- Flight patterns as identifiers, such as the hornbill's heavy, "helicopter-like" wingbeats.
- Field distinctions like the Black Drongo's white cheek patch compared to the Ashy Drongo's uniform coloration.
- Common birds, such as the Asian Green Bee-eater, were highlighted as essential starting points. Selvaganesh emphasized that conservation awareness grows when we pay attention to everyday species, not just the rare or endangered.

2. Endemism and Migration

The Western Ghats, where Selvaganesh works, is rich in endemic species such as the Malabar Whistling Thrush and the Nilgiri Laughing Thrush. He reminded us that such species, restricted to small ranges, act as ecological indicators whose conservation is globally significant.

Migration stories captured another dimension of birds' lives:

- The Grey Wagtail, central to his celebration, migrates from the Himalaya to southern India.
- The Amur Falcon, famous for its transcontinental journey and stopovers in Nagaland.
- The Pied Cuckoo, long celebrated in Indian culture as the harbinger of the monsoon.
- By weaving natural history with culture, he showed us how migration links continents and

cultures, underscoring the need for cross-border conservation.

3. Bird Atlases and Citizen Science

Selvaganesh drew our attention to ongoing large-scale monitoring:

- The Kerala Bird Atlas, completed over five years, providing a benchmark for state-level biodiversity data.
- The Coimbatore Bird Atlas, a regional effort that mapped habitat-level bird diversity.
- Seasonal counts such as the Pongal Bird Count, which engage birders across Tamil Nadu.
- He also directed us on how to use apps like eBird and MYNA to learn about birds and also to contribute to the citizen science platforms.

4. Ecology and Behaviour

Selvaganesh also introduced us to ecological concepts illuminated by bird behaviour:

- Murmurations, the coordinated flight patterns of starlings and other species, as strategies for predator evasion.
- Brood parasitism, with examples like the Yellow-billed Babbler hosting cuckoos.
- These discussions reinforced the idea that birds are not isolated entities but participants in complex ecological networks.

5. Conservation Frameworks and Resources

Finally, he directed us to resources that can guide future conservation efforts:

- Bird Count India and the State of India's Birds Report for reliable national datasets.
- The People's Biodiversity Register (PBR) as a tool for documenting local ecological knowledge.
- These tools, he emphasized, empower fellows like us to move from passive observation to active contribution in conservation science.

Reflections as RHATC Fellows

For us, three key reflections emerged:

1. Conservation can be joyful. The grey wagtail celebration shows how a festive act, sharing sweets can anchor ecological awareness. By making bird migration part of cultural practice, Selvaganesh ensures that even non-birders connect with conservation.
2. Citizen science democratizes knowledge. Through eBird, even paper checklists from schoolchildren in

This Tamil Nadu hill station welcomes winter migrant, Grey wagtail, with posters

Published - September 12, 2020 05:01 pm IST - Coimbatore

The posters, printed in Tamil and English and pasted at various spots in Valparai, welcome the bird that travels all the way down from the Himalayas



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A student pasting posters welcoming the Grey wagtail in Valparai

Hindu article covering the welcoming of Grey wagtail at Valparai.

Valparai school celebrates the arrival of Grey wagtail from the Himalayas

Published - September 16, 2022 09:33 pm IST - COIMBATORE



WILSON THOMAS



The Government High School, Cinchona, celebrates the arrival of the Grey wagtail.

Hindu article covering the celebration at valparai school on return of the Grey wagtail.

Valparai feed into global datasets. Conservation is no longer the monopoly of researchers; anyone can contribute meaningfully.

3. Every bird matters. While much attention often goes to rare or endangered species, Selvaganesh reminded us that documenting and celebrating common birds is just as critical. They form the ecological fabric upon which rarer species depend.

Conclusion

The RHATC 'Follow the Leader' session with K. Selvaganesh highlighted a form of leadership that is humble, rooted, and transformative. As a teacher, he has inspired his students to see birds not just as creatures in the sky but as neighbors, migrants, and teachers themselves. As a citizen scientist, he has strengthened India's bird monitoring networks. And as a cultural innovator, he has shown how traditions like the wagtail celebration can bind communities to conservation. For us fellows, this was not just a lesson in ornithology but in leadership itself. To follow a leader like Selvaganesh is to recognize that conservation does not begin in conference halls or research labs alone, it can begin in a classroom, with a child's checklist, or with a box of sweets shared in joy at the sight of a returning bird.

Gratitude

We are immensely grateful to Zoo Outreach Organisation and to Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation for arranging such an enriching and insightful session. A special note of gratitude to Mr. K. Selvaganesh for sharing his inspiring experiences and journey in birding, which truly motivated us to observe and appreciate birds with a deeper perspective.

References

- Team eBird (11 January 2018).** K. Selvaganesh, December eBirder of the Month. eBird.
- The Hindu (12 May 2020).** This Tamil Nadu hill station welcomes winter migrant grey wagtail with posters.
- The Hindu (12 October 2023).** Valparai school celebrates the arrival of grey wagtail from the Himalayas.

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Please join us in congratulating K. Selvaganesh of Saravanampatti, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

eBird's congratulations for Selva Ganesh for being the highest contributor.