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NATURE

Birding in the high mountains

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The Forest Department in Uttarakhand is involving local communities in a novel conservation initiative for the State's bird population, which, in terms of sheer variety, is the envy of the rest of India. Text & Photographs by ASHISH KOTHARI

EVER experienced exhilarating delight and extreme frustration at the same time? Try being in the midst of a mixed flock of birds in a highland forest in Uttarakhand, and you will see what I mean. There is activity all around: calls by the dozen, leaves rustling for reasons that are not apparent, a sudden flutter of wings overhead, and maddening glimpses of all the colours of the rainbow. By the time you focus your binoculars on a bird, your peripheral vision has detected another movement, and your ears are hearing calls you want to investigate.

And then there also butterflies and other insects joining the party. It is a delightful microcosm of nature at work and play, but one that is enormously confusing.

There is a solution. Curtail your urge to move on and reach a destination. Just stop and let the birds reveal themselves. Birding in Uttarakhand's forests requires patience, and the rewards are well worth it. Possibly the only State that can boast of having over half of India's avifauna (which is close to 1,300), Uttarakhand is a dream come true for both the enthusiastic amateur birdwatcher and the seasoned ornithologist.

The State's avian diversity is a result of the altitudinal variations —from the plains of Udhamsingh Nagar district to some of the highest mountains of the Himalayas—and the range of habitats comprising lakes, rivers, forests of various hues, riverine and mountain grasslands, snow-capped peaks and glaciers, and human settlements.

It is not only birders who get hooked. I found this out first hand when, as a supposed expert conducting two bird camps, I saw the transformation in the ground-level staff of the Uttarakhand Forest Department. Possibly nominated to be there by their superiors, some of them started off with a "so what" attitude. But at the end of three days they were demanding to be invited for the next. Who would not, after observing the exquisite beauty of the green magpie, the dignified power of the crested serpent eagle, the remarkable hovering stamina of the pied kingfisher and the feeding habits of the rufous-bellied woodpecker?

And so there we were, dragging ourselves out of bed at 5-30 a.m. on cold mornings, quickly gulping down a hot mug of tea, and peering around for the early bird out to get the first worms, berries, bark insects, or whatever else it fancied. Around the Maheshkhan and Sitabani Rest Houses in Nainital district, among the first to greet us with derisive cackling were the white-throated laughing thrushes, always in groups, always noisy. A pair of green magpies caused more excitement, relatively uncommon (not to mention prettier, at least in colour) as they are. By now wide awake, the group moved into the forest, and there began the real test for my skills as an instructor. I would spy a bird, make sure of its identification, then point to a spot in the foliage where the participants were supposed to focus their binoculars.

Now, that was fine if the bird was as obliging as the green magpie, which moves slowly, and does not have anything else closely resembling it. But if it was a grey-capped pigmy woodpecker whose only distinguishing feature from a brown-capped pigmy woodpecker was, well, you can guess from the name, then by the time I would say "look at its grey cap", both the cap and everything else attached to it would have flown away.

Kaleidoscope of Feathers

The white-throated laughing thrush is not the only one making fun of birders. The forests of Uttarakhand, especially those in the lower and middle altitudes in Maheshkhan and Sitabani (the latter being on the fringes of the Corbett Tiger Reserve), have a variety of its cousins. They include the white-crested laughing thrush with its unmistakable (you guessed it) white crest, the chestnut-crowned, the streaked, which is also common around human settlements, and the shiest of them all, the striated laughing thrush.

Some of the long-tailed birds that emerge early in the morning, other than the green magpie, include the black-headed jay and the less common Eurasian jay, both striking in their boldly patterned and patch-coloured bodies. With a bit of luck you will be able to see the Khaleej pheasant running through the undergrowth and the red jungle fowl, often mistaken for a village cock or hen. Higher up the mountains, for instance, where I have birded around Munsiari in Pithorgarh district or the Nandadevi side above Joshimath, or any of the other Himalayan pastures and high-altitude forests, the brilliantly-hued Monal pheasant is common. Other pheasants can be sighted with a bit of effort.

Most of the species in the mixed flock I have mentioned above are small in size. Flycatchers are an almost inevitable part of this flock. The delicate blue verditer flycatcher is possibly the most common. Around Maheshkhan, we were lucky to see the ultramarine, or white-browed, flycatcher a number of times.

The grey-headed canary treated us to its frequent acrobatic sallies while catching insects in the air. Also part of the flock are scarlet minivets, with the male a deep red and the female an equally deep yellow. They have to be one of the best-dressed couples in the Indian forests. There are also a number of tiny and hyperactive titmice (small non-migratory woodland birds) species, especially in forests at somewhat higher altitudes.

An occasional woodpecker also becomes part of the flock. Woodpeckers are in themselves worth a visit to Uttarakhand's forests. I have so often walked for a considerable distance without witnessing a movement in the foliage or hearing a sound, only to be startled by a loud drumming somewhere above my head. Craning my neck at angles a yogi would be proud of, I would see a woodpecker busy digging for insects or tree sap. At each of the sites I have birded, I have seen at least half a dozen species of woodpeckers. But my personal favourite is the one that has a sweet tooth like I have: the rufous-bellied woodpecker. Also called the sapsucker, it actually taps the bark of trees that yield a sweet sap, moving around the trunk and creating circular pock-marked rings.

Then there are the sunbirds, the tiny jewels of the avian world. The green-tailed, the crimson, and Mrs. Gould's, each have at least half a dozen colours, and they take your breath away as they hover over a nectar-filled flower, that is, if you have any breath left after clambering up some steep slope.

If daintiness is the hallmark of sunbirds, sheer power defines another set of birds, the raptors. A triple shriek high above, or from the canopy of a forest, is likely to be the crested serpent eagle. Another bird of prey with a prominent crest is the mountain hawk eagle.

Up in Munsiari, I remember watching with awe the lammergeier, or bearded vulture, known for its habit of dropping bones from a height in order to get at the marrow. I will never forget some of the nocturnal birds of prey I have seen, including the fearsome-looking brown fish owl in the Corbett Tiger Reserve, and the much more diminutive but equally fierce-looking jungle owlet near Sitabani. Once, close to a stream, I was startled to see the owlet emerge from a pile of fallen leaves it had been shaking to flush out insects, which it, and some grateful titmice and bee-eaters, then quickly snapped up.

At the stream itself, the musical call of the Himalayan whistling thrush enticed us, and as we approached closer we saw two other common sights of the Himalayan waterbodies, the white-capped and plumbeous water redstarts, and the brown dipper braving the rapid flow to walk on the stream floor, half-submerged, in a bid to catch aquatic creatures.

In bigger rivers in the State, one can see a large variety of bigger water birds such as ducks, geese, storks, cormorants and egrets. The Maheshkhan and Sitabani camps were organised by the Uttarakhand Forest Department in association with research and civil society organisations, and were part of an ongoing series of camps. The camps involve field trips and classroom exercises on the basics of birding, bird physiology, habitat and behaviour, the role of birds in our lives, the cultural and economic importance of birds and their conservation status.

Inevitably, crucial topics such as the threats posed by hydropower projects, plastics, and agricultural chemicals, also come up. Over a dozen camps have been held so far. Rajiv Bhartari, Chief Conservator of Forests who heads the Department's ecotourism wing, came up with the idea to promote birding spots and create greater awareness and skills among his staff, the local communities and visitors. A camp coming up in Munsiari in association with non-governmental organisations such as Himal Prakriti, Kalpavriksh and Titli Trust will involve a number of local women and youth who hope to use their newly acquired skills in ongoing community-based ecotourism initiatives.

Almost 300 forest staff, ecotourism guides, village residents, students, resource persons and others have participated in the programme so far (unfortunately it has involved very few women). Awareness material including a book for nature guides has been produced in English and Hindi.

If such camps are held more frequently and in other States, too, they could help create a network of nature enthusiasts who have the skills to maintain the excitement but reduce the confusion amid a mixed flock of birds.

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