



## Places

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UTTARAKHAND

### 13. Birds' Eye Views

The forest department's birdwatching camps take off—and you're invited.

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**T**here are very few things that can drag me out of bed at 5.30am on a cold morning. But unfamiliar bird calls, and the prospect of seeing what made them, do the trick. And so it transpired that for four consecutive mornings I woke at the crack of dawn, to peer bleary-eyed at the trees around the wonderfully located Maheshkhan Rest House in Nainital district, Uttarakhand. In late April, I was part of a three-day birdwatching camp here, and in the process came across some of the most delightful creatures that inhabit the Himalayan ranges.

I was with about 20 participants of the camp, half of them never having birded or even handled binoculars before

. I'm not quite sure how it happened but somehow I was chosen as the bird expert, so it became my responsibility to introduce the basics of birding to these good folk. Not so easy in a dense forest, where the creatures you are trying to make everyone see are anyway playing hide and seek. By the time I could say "look at its yellow eyebrow" (struggling to find the right Hindi term), not only the eyebrow but everything attached to it would have moved on.

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Nevertheless, we made considerable progress. By the end of the three days, participants who started off looking either bored or befuddled, or both, were enthusiastically poring over field guides to try to remember all they had seen. People who knew almost no English were pronouncing, if hesitatingly, names like rustycheeked scimitar babbler. Most wanted to continue birding in one way or the other, and urged that a refresher camp be organised soon!

This transformation of absolute novices to enthusiastic birders is hardly a surprise—Uttarakhand's birds will do this to anyone. The bewildering diversity of colours, shapes, sizes, patterns, calls, flight patterns and behavioural traits that they display can captivate the most hardened cynic. Not to mention the oft-quaint names that ornithologists have cooked up for them. The state boasts of about half the total diversity of avifauna found in India, so it is no wonder that Uttarakhand is a birdwatcher's favourite.

Among the first to wish us good morning as we ventured out of our cabins were the whitethroated laughing thrushes, cackling at our sleepy faces, their large white throat patches strongly contrasting with the green foliage. Usually in flocks of six to twelve, noisy as a bunch of excited teenagers, these birds are also quite bold—stand quietly in one place, and they will come to within a few feet of you. A cousin, the streaked laughing thrush, is also a human commensal (meaning, common around settlements). Not so bold are a few others of this cackling family, like the striated, but we did see it occasionally.

Also early risers were two species of jays, the blackheaded and the less common Eurasian. Strikingly attired, the former was quite helpful to me as instructor, emerging long enough for me to point to its characteristic features. The Eurasian, perhaps conscious of its mixed inheritance name, was a bit more shy but when spotted, equally striking with its rufous brown body and blue-black wings.

Much smaller, but brilliantly conspicuous, were the longtailed minivets, the male a deep red, the female an equally deep yellow. This has to be one of the best-dressed couples in India's forests! (And also a personal favourite because they are my cue to ask an unsuspecting birder a riddle I made up: what is an animal doctor's child called? A mini vet, of course!)

Typically, our morning walks would start with these species, easy to spot. As we wandered deeper into the forest, we would have to get into more seriously observant mode. Often for minutes there would be no movement, not a sound, then suddenly a loud drumming somewhere above our heads. Peering into the foliage, we'd spot a woodpecker working away at the bark, searching for insects to devour. This family of birds is one of the biggest in Himalayan forests; in those three days alone we saw or heard nine species of woodpeckers! Common among these were the Himalayan woodpecker, its white wing-spot as

striking as the laughing thrush's throat, the greenheaded, its machine-gun call heard more often than the bird seen, and the brownfronted, with a heavily patterned black-and-white back contrasting with red head and under-tail area (vent, for those who are scientifically inclined).

Another large family is that of titmice. Tiny birds, but with all manners of colouring, several species were commonly seen by the participants; some were even lucky enough to see the male and female coming with a caterpillar in their mouth, sitting on a tree branch, then suddenly diving into a hole in the trunk. Clearly, nesting and baby-feeding time was in full swing. We saw titmice, woodpeckers, flycatchers, sibilias and other species engaging in similar behaviour. A little delight, surprisingly common at Maheshkhan, was the ultramarine flycatcher, very distinguished looking with its lawyer-like shoulder patch. But the one that won an impromptu poll on the most beautiful bird seen at the camp was the gorgeously coloured rufousbellied niltava, its patient perch on a branch waiting for insects allowing all participants to see it to their heart's content.

In all, the Maheshkhan camp participants saw or heard over 70 species. The field trips were supplemented with presentations on the basics of birding, on bird physiology, habitat and behaviour and on the role of birds in our lives. Discussions were also held on the current status of conservation of the 1,250-plus species of birds that India harbours.

Maheshkhan was only one of a series of camps that are being organised by the Uttarakhand Forest Department. Five camps have been held, and at least ten more are planned. Chief Conservator of Forests Rajiv Bhartari, heading the Department's Ecotourism wing, explains why he initiated these camps: "We are trying to promote destinations that are rich in birdlife and have significant community involvement in tourism through birdwatching camps. We hope that with improved awareness, skills and use of guidebooks there will be an increase in birdwatching activity ultimately helping us in conservation."

More than 110 forest staff, ecotourism guides, villagers, students and others have already participated. A book for nature guides, and other awareness material, is also being produced. Hopefully the series will continue for many years, and will be emulated by other states. This will result in a cadre of enthusiastic and increasingly skilled birders, an evolving base of information from several sites and opportunities for a diversity of people to enjoy the rich avian heritage of this Himalayan state. All helping, hopefully, in the ultimate objective: saving this heritage for its own sake and for our children and grandchildren to cherish.

*The next birdwatching camp will be held in Binsar, and will be conducted by Sanjay Sondhi of the Titli Trust (Sept 28–30). Other camps are planned for Dhanaulti, Agora/Dodital, Khirsu, Kanaser and Pangot. Fees for the 3D/2N camps are Rs 4,000, and include accommodation, travel within the birding zone, expert lectures and meals. For details and bookings, contact Range Officer Devendra Kumar Kala (9634184294, ccf\_ecotourismua@rediffmail.com).*

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