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The 'birdness' of a bird



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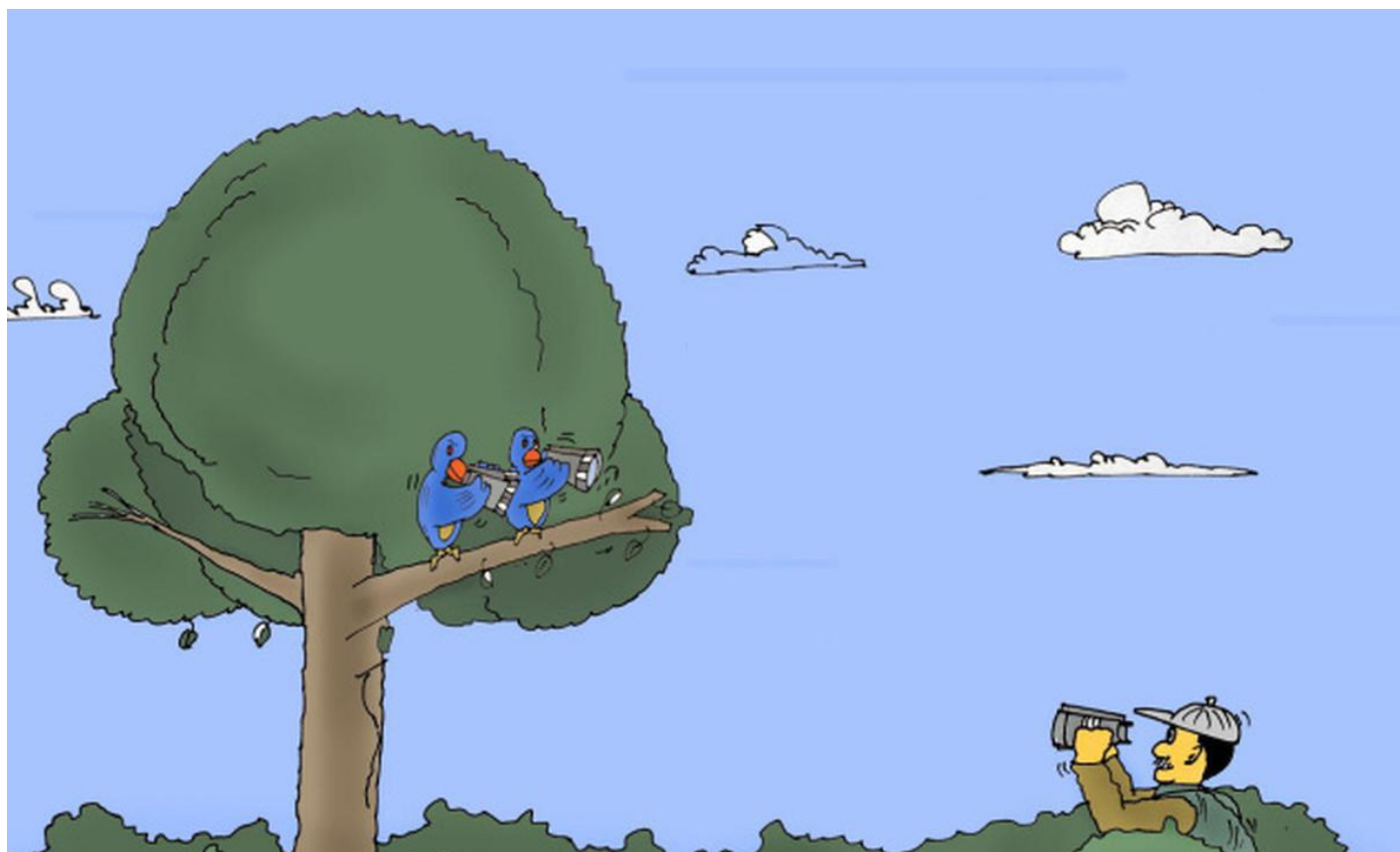


Illustration: Kris Hariharan

Bird-watching is now reduced to 'identifying'. As if a bird's name, artificially imposed by us, is a short-cut to understanding it

Of all the senses that nature has given us, we seem to give the maximum

preference to sight. Only those who have been deprived of this sense possibly realise the importance of other senses, including hearing and smell, and sharply point us to what the rest of us are missing out on.

For some time I have realised this as part of one of my favourite activities, birding or, the more common term, birdwatching. The latter phrase actually shows the bias: we go *looking* for birds, we rely on what they look like to identify them, we exclaim in wonder at the beauty of their wing colours or the pattern of their crests. But as any good birder (and I'm not one) will tell you, as important as appearance is, a number of other aspects – their calls, size, flight pattern, and general behaviour – are just as useful as identifying marks. Take the inspiring example of Uruguay's Juan Pablo Culasso, blind and able to identify over 3,000 bird sounds and 720 bird species by their calls.

But besides these, good birding is, in fact, heavily dependent on another of our sense, that hard-to-define one called 'feel', which borders on instinct. I discovered this recently when I was out with ace birder S. Subramanya in the forests near Munsiri in Uttarakhand. His ability to identify birds, even when all we had was just a glimpse, was the subject of much wonder among the rest of us, all participants in a bird training programme.

'Cuckoo-shrike', he would say confidently. "How do you know when we've hardly even seen the bird?" we would ask. Subbu's modest response about his 'years of practice' hid an important element of birding, what has been called the 'jizz' or vibe of a bird, a sort of combination of various senses that helps identify a cuckoo-shrike when all you've noticed is a flash of something darkly greyish, a sudden kind of movement as the bird flies off, and perhaps the sound of its fluttering or a half-call. Australian birder Sean Dooley has defined the jizz of a bird as "the indefinable quality of a particular species, the vibe it gives off".

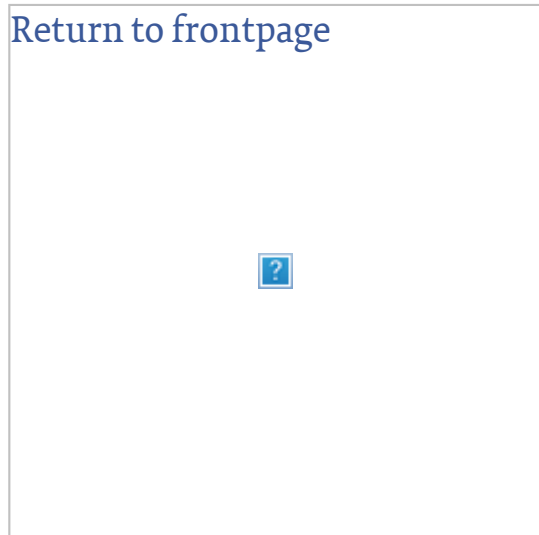
Undoubtedly, a part of this has to do with spending years and decades with birds, by when the combination of half-sight, half-sound and knowledge of the habitat, the time of day, season and other factors help you come to a lightening quick identification of the bird. Perhaps, subconsciously, even the smells around you have helped.

But I would like to submit a further thought, about the possibility of something beyond our five senses that helps us identify a bird. Perhaps there is also a collective sense, subconsciously or unconsciously imbibed in us, which enables us to identify birds we've hardly ever, or even never, seen before. I've believed that this could come from having seen its image in a bird book or on the Web, but could it not also be because we are part of the larger knowledge base of birders around us, even those we don't know? Is it possible that there are some waves of knowledge and experience, difficult to perceive, that blend with and influence our instincts, that connect birders through the sixth (or nth) sense?

Many bird scientists are likely to scoff at this hypothesis. But I am still putting it out there, as I don't believe that science has all the answers or a sole claim to knowledge. Birding is, for me, not only a scientific activity, it is an act of absorbing and getting absorbed in the rest of nature, an indescribable feeling of both humility and empowerment, a quieting of the mind and heart and soul. Sometimes, this gets overtaken by the somewhat reductionist act of identifying a bird (as if its name, artificially imposed by us on it, is a short-cut to understanding it, or is its only identity). But sometimes, if we are sensitive to the jizz, birding can be transformed into an act of joy and understanding and oneness, of reconnecting with life on earth in its various dazzling dimensions.

But in any case, my main point here is the need to transform birdwatching into birding, or even more broadly 'naturing'. Where we are open to nature through all the senses we consciously know of and some we don't. Nature-watching, nature-hearing, nature-smelling, nature-touching, nature-feeling, and the mother of them all, nature-immersion.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, an environment action group in Pune, and is the author of Birds in Our Lives.



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