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# Visitors from the skies



Ashish Kothari

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Welcome visitors: At Mangaljodi. Photo: Special Arrangement

**The people of Mangaljodi, in Odisha believe that guests are important, regardless of who they are. So, when they fly in, it is the red carpet for**

## them!

Birds as guests? Where in the world would such a strange thing happen?

In Odisha, there is a village called Mangalajodi, perched on the edge of the great Chilika lagoon. Come winter, hundreds of thousands of water birds fly in to settle in the waters here. They come from as far as North Asia and Europe, and are rather tired when they arrive. The villagers welcome them, and make sure they are not hunted, stoned, or harmed in any way.

Fifteen years ago, this was not the case. In those days, many of the villagers used to hunt the birds, partly to eat them and partly to sell them in the market. Of course, a small level of hunting would not be a problem, and some of the villagers may have needed the protein if they were too poor to buy meat in the market. But the level of hunting was high, and so, some locals were worried that the bird populations may go down. Around that time, a local organisation, “Wild Orissa”, also started talking to the villagers, and together they realised that this was no way to treat guests coming in from thousands of kilometres away. So they decided that they would stop the hunting!

But, there was a problem for the people who depended on hunting for their living. So, Wild Orissa and a group of villagers decided to start an ecotourism activity, training some of the local youngsters in becoming nature guides. They spread the news to attract birdwatchers from nearby areas like Bhubaneswar. The Chilika Development Authority also provided help. Some local buildings were converted into places for visitors to stay.

I have visited Mangalajodi a couple of times in the last few years, and it is a visual delight. Local youth like Madhava Behera and Rama Hari will take you out in a rowboat, and it is an incredible experience gliding along the water surrounded by thousands of ducks, godwits, gulls, terns, sandpipers and other birds whose names are hard to pronounce. It's also nice to see that the villagers continue their traditional activities of fishing and buffalo grazing, causing no disturbance to the birds. As winter ends, the breeding season for the birds that live here through the year starts, and villagers are careful not to disturb

important nesting sites.

Recently, Mangalajodi got a well-deserved national conservation award. But it also faces problems because of too much tourism – so lots of cars and lots of boats disturb the birds including many pesky photographers wanting a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ shot. So, if you are visiting Mangalajodi, take care to be quiet, don’t insist on getting close to the birds, and tick off tourists making noise or photographers chasing birds!

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