



CHILDREN

Astounding ADJUTANTS





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Bhagalpur's inhabitants are happy with their noisy guests. And, thanks to this, the guests are growing in number.

Ever seen a two-storied village, the ground floor occupied by villagers, and the first floor by birds? Well, I was recently in the Bhagalpur region of Bihar, where I saw this strange sight – and heard a heart-warming story of ‘ordinary’ villagers protecting the inhabitants of the floor above them.

With a friend, Arvind Mishra of the Mandar Nature Club, I visited the floodplains of the Ganga and Kosi rivers. In several villages, I was treated to the sight of the Greater adjutant stork nesting on trees towering above people's houses. This rather huge and ungainly looking bird is the world's rarest stork. It nests only in Bihar and Assam. Sharing trees with the rather more colourful painted storks, and busy feeding their young ones, these birds were creating a racket. I wondered how villagers could possibly stand the cacophony. However, they did not seem to complain. Instead, they were proudly showing me how their ‘guests’ are not at all afraid of nesting in trees right next to streets and houses.

Welcoming guests

I was most curious – why did villagers not only tolerate these noisy creatures in their midst, but also zealously protect them? I got the explanation from Parmanand Kesir, an elderly resident of Bagri village. “These birds have been coming to our village for a long time, in small numbers. We considered it to be Lord Vishnu's *vahana* (vehicle), but did not know much about it. Then, Mishraji came and told us that they are found in only a couple of places in India, how far they come from, and how they are a national and global heritage. So, we decided to do something more for them. They are after all our guests,” he said.

The protection given by the villagers has shown visible results. In 2006-07, there were only 16 nests in Bagri and other villages. Now, there are 106. Arvind estimates the adjutant population to be at least 400 now. The forest department has also encouraged villagers, giving them saplings of *semal*, *kadam*, *pipal*, *bargad* trees, which the storks prefer, for nesting. And the storks have in turn, done the villagers a good deed. Because of their rare and threatened status, there is now global attention by conservationists to this area. This has prompted the

government to provide a bridge, roads, and other facilities. But, this is not all good! Just outside a local high school, there is a tree with a huge number of stork nests, and now a major highway is threatening its peace. Let's hope that the students and other residents are able to prevent any damage to the tree and the nests!

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